SHORT STORIES

No. 785. Week Ending January 16, 1904. Price One Penny.

The poisonous gas was filling the room. The precious packet was at her feet, but she was held powerless in the grip of the chair!

(A Thrilling Incident from the Powerful Story, "In the Hands of the Enemy." See inside.)

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SHORT STORIES

No. 785.] [ONE PENNY.

For the Week Ending January 16th, 1904.

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY.

The Story of a Girl's Peril and a Tardy Retribution.

Containing the incident depicted on the cover.

"MRS. TYRRELL, Doris and I have come to ask for your sanction to our engagement!"

Austin Howard had prepared a pretty little set speech for this momentous occasion—not that he was a timid man, for he looked frank and fearless as he walked across the small, plainly-furnished room with the happy and blushing Doris by his side—but even the coolest of men find it difficult to make a good impromptu speech in such circumstances. He stopped somewhat abruptly, for Mrs. Tyrrell had not risen from the couch with a smile and with outstretched hands ready to pronounce the maternal benediction.

She looked up slowly and gazed at them with only half-comprehending eyes. As she looked at them, the full significance of the words flashed upon her, and she rose to her feet with something very like a groan, letting slip from her trembling fingers a letter which fluttered to the ground and lay near Doris' feet.

"Mother! What is it?" inquired the girl anxiously. She forgot the immediate object of their entry into this apartment and hurried to her mother. "What is it? Have you had bad news?"

There was a pause, during which time Mrs. Tyrrell appeared to be gathering her strength for a great effort. When she spoke, she did so in a clear, firm voice:

"Yes; I have had news which is bad and affects you two in a way which you do not suspect. I have never spoken of this matter, because there seemed to be no necessity for doing so; but now I must speak, for my enemy is finding me out once more!"

Austin and Doris stared at Mrs. Tyrrell in perplexity. The latter stooped to pick up the fateful letter and motioned them to take seats near her. The pallor of her face was striking, but there was an air of great determination on the features which impressed her listeners with a sense of the importance of what she was about to tell them.

Austin drew a chair near the couch, but Doris sat by her mother's side and flung her arms round her neck with a cry of "Mother dear, mother dear!"

"You will both learn for the first time that my name is not Tyrrell!" began that lady. "Don't interrupt me, Doris, my child, but restrain your feelings and listen! My name, and Doris', is Seymour. I need not go into the whole story. Your father, Doris, was a doctor with a good practice when we married, but we made an enemy by that marriage. Mr. Sidney Lucas, a solicitor, wished to marry me; he was also angry because your father's reputation increased, to the detriment of his—Lucas'—younger brother, who was also a medical practitioner in the same town. He set to work to ruin us.

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"I am telling you what I believe to be the truth, although I cannot produce proof. He spread lying reports concerning my husband's medical mistakes, and that kind of thing is very difficult to expose when it is done cleverly, while the results of such defamation are positive. My husband found that his practice was decreasing; he heard of the rumours, but could not trace the author. He denied them, but the calumny spread and we were distracted.

"Then came a diabolical climax. My husband was accused of having prescribed the wrong medicine for a particular complaint and the patient died! The paper on which he wrote the prescription was produced; it was a clever forgery, but everyone believed that the charge was correct. To make matters worse, when the patient's will was read, it was found that she had left all her estate to Dr. Seymour!

"Lucas swore to drawing up the will at the lady's request; he stated that he expostulated with her, but she was clearly under the influence of her medical adviser and she persisted in her intention.

"The will was contested by the relatives, but my husband declared that he had never mentioned the matter of will-making to his deceased patient and did not defend the suit, which, of course, went against him and left the property in the hands of the relatives as he desired.

"This will made things look very black against your father, Doris, and the verdict of the coroner's jury, that the death was due to misadventure, was regarded as a mistake. It was quite a wonder that my husband was not prosecuted for murder!

"The result was that we were ruined at last; we had to steal away and live in retirement on the small annuity which we were able to purchase with the money we had. We dreaded the evil designs of the villain who had done so much wrong; we feared that he would yet pursue us, for he found out whither we had gone and had spread greater calumnies abroad concerning us. So we left that part of the country altogether and hid ourselves under the name of Tyrrell, my maiden name. My husband did not long survive his ruin; he died when Doris was five years old—fifteen years ago—and I have lived in seclusion ever since.

"I have never heard of Lucas since then, and I believed—shall I say that I *hoped?*—that he was dead. Yet, after all this time, he is finding me out! This letter, which is from the only relative I have, and the only person who knows of my whereabouts and my assumed name, tells me that Lucas is on my track again! I will not read it to you; it sounds innocent enough, but I know the man!

"Now, it is quite probable that he will discover us and make

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our identity known. Everyone believes in the mistake, and many believe in the supposed guilt, of your father!

"You see what that means, Mr. Howard? It means that your wife will be branded as the daughter of a man who was morally a criminal, but who escaped the legal consequences by some lucky accident! Are you willing to face that?"

Mrs. Tyrrell's lips were dry when she finished speaking.

Doris had buried her face on her mother's bosom and was quietly sobbing—sobbing with sorrow at the misfortunes of her parents and at the overthrow of her own happiness.

Austin Howard's face was pale; he gazed steadily into the eyes of Doris' mother and saw in them a look which convinced him of the truth of her story. He rose, took the girl from her mother's bosom, and folded her in his arms.

"It will make no difference!" he said simply.

"No, no!" cried the girl, liberating herself from his embrace. "It will not be just to bring that disgrace upon you! Can we not do something to defeat the evil machinations of this man and bring his misdeeds to light?"

"I care nothing for what the world may say!" declared the young man passionately. "Doris, you are mine, you gave yourself to me only a few moments ago, and I claim you! I will not listen to these Quixotic scruples!"

"I think that Doris is not entirely wrong!" said Mrs. Tyrrell (for so we will continue to call her) in a tone of quiet decision. "I do not know whether or not we shall be able to do anything against this man, but I intend to try. I will let him find me out, if he can, and then act. I think, also, that you must submit to a trial of love, Mr. Howard!

"I propose to make a stipulation, namely, that you two shall not see one another or correspond for six months. Nay!" she added, as Howard broke in impatiently, "it will be a test for both of you. Do not blame me or think me hard; I am doing it for the best!"

"But perhaps Doris will be in danger, and I wish to have the right to help her!" cried Howard in expostulation.

"I intend to get Doris away from here without anyone knowing where she has gone," said Mrs. Tyrrell calmly. "You know our story, Mr. Howard. Doris was working hard for an appointment when she fell ill, and so proved herself unequal for it. Afterwards, she began to try for a post as secretary to some lady or gentleman, in order to eke out our small income. We did not like parting, but it was necessary. Well, she can take up such an appointment and hold it till—till other conditions arise!"

Howard protested, but there was a majority against him, for Doris desired it. He looked reproachfully at her as she expressed the wish, but the girl's eyes filled with tears and he called himself a brute.

"I yield to the suggestion, but with bad grace!" he said with a sad smile. "All I can say is that I should like to imitate Rip van Winkle during the next six months!"

So it was settled, and Doris continued her negotiations for the post of secretary to a gentleman in a country house not far from Inverness; these negotiations had been commenced, and it was this fact which hastened Austin Howard's declaration and led to the scene just described.

Strange are the ways of Fate! Doris obtained the post and left for Inverness within a week; and that new departure in her life was the first step towards the vindication of her father's character!

Eskadell, as the country house was called, was situated a few miles from Inverness, and it was a lonely place to all except those fond of purely natural beauty. Doris found life at Eskadell very pleasant after the first feeling of homesickness had worn off; she liked her occupation, which was to act as amanuensis for Mr. Martin Carden, in connection with his scientific researches and his commercial interests, and she delighted to roam about the grounds and the adjoining country, studying the flowers, the plants, and the animal life. At times she felt dull at the loss of Howard's company and letters, and the recollection of her father's misfortunes cast a shadow over her, but she was fairly happy in her new surroundings.

Mr. Carden was not difficult to please, and he began to take a fancy to Doris. On her side, the girl scarcely knew how to judge the man; he was courteous to a degree, and was held in high esteem by everyone, as she could see by the tone of the letters which reached him, yet she had an indefinable feeling that there was something hidden.

A month passed and she had overcome this feeling to some extent when, as he paid her the first month's salary, it was revived and intensified.

"I shall be away for a day or two, Miss Tyrrell!" he told her, with a curious light in his eyes. "I do not think that anything important will arise, but you will leave the letters unopened in any case. You will find many papers to put in order in the room above, and you will have sufficient occupation till I return. It is *very* important business!"

He turned away as he said the last words, but he was not quite quick enough to prevent Doris from seeing an almost fiendish gleam in his steely eyes. It made her shudder, and she felt inclined to tell him then and there that she must leave Eskadell at the end of the second month; he was out of the room, however, before she could say anything, and she afterwards tried to laugh at her foolishness.

Left to her own resources, Doris busied herself by setting things straight in the room above. There were all kinds of publications containing marked articles, which had to be indexed for reference; there were other cuttings which had to be pasted in books, and there were many letters and communications which had to be reduced to order. She was indexing a cutting when she came across the word "Lucas," and the name at once attracted her attention.

Turning to the page indicated, she found a cutting from a newspaper published in the town where her mother and father had lived; it was a sensational account of the flight of Mr. Lucas, her father's enemy, who had been detected in the misappropriation of trust moneys.

She read it again and again.

"That ought to go a long way towards clearing my father's character!" was her first thought; but she afterwards remembered that the flight of Lucas did not convict him of spreading calumnies against her father. "Still," she murmured, with a glow on her cheeks, "this information should give my mother a weapon of defence if Lucas should really be hunting her out with a view to pursuing his malevolent designs. I will tell her of this, and perhaps she can have him tracked and arrested."

She discontinued her work to write a long letter to her mother; when this was done, she had time for reflection.

"How did Mr. Carden come to take sufficient interest in Lucas to preserve that cutting?" she asked herself. "When he comes back, I will take an opportunity to casually inquire; I must be careful, lest he detects the secret of the name of Tyrrell!"

On the third day, Doris received a letter from her mother; in it the sorrowful woman explained that Lucas, much older in appearance yet still easily recognisable, had found her. He had stopped her on her walk and had deliberately stated his intention of persecuting her. "I had had your letter," continued Mrs. Tyrrell, "so I threatened him with arrest. He turned red with rage; he had evidently thought (and rightly) that I knew nothing of the past; but he soon recovered and laughed at my threat. He would make every place so unpleasant for me, he swore, that I should be glad to be at rest for ever. And then, Doris, he spoke of you and said that he would wreak his vengance on you! He would get you in his power and kill you! I am so glad that you are away, but I tremble for you, my child! The man must be mad!"

The letter ended somewhat abruptly, testifying to the mental condition of Mrs. Tyrrell; the reading of that note left Doris pale and agitated. Who was this man, and how could his wicked deeds be stopped?

"You look pale, Miss Tyrrell!" remarked Mr. Carden cheerily, when he appeared the next day. "Found it rather lonely here, eh? Yes, it must be lonely for you, although there are several servants here. Feel one by yourself, of

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course. Well perhaps we can make it more pleasant for you. Ha, ha!"

Doris felt grateful for his consideration, although that laugh jarred upon her nerves; but Mr. Carden was really so affable that Doris began to feel less miserable. Perhaps Mr. Carden could throw some light on the Lucas matter?

"You have a curious collection of cuttings, Mr. Carden," she took occasion to observe with apparent unconcern. "I actually saw one about a dishonest solicitor named Lucas. Did you know him?"

Carden started as if stung. "Oh, you saw that, did you?" he queried slowly, and speaking with evident restraint. "I don't know why I kept that cutting. I met him once. Yes, we must soak that slip off the sheet and destroy it. Do *you* know anything of that man?" he inquired suddenly.

It was now Doris' turn to start and flush. "My mother knew a solicitor of that name years ago; possibly it is the same," murmured the girl.

Carden swung round on his swivel chair and did not reply; it was well for Doris that she did not see the cruel smile that played round his clean-shaven lips.

Doris concluded that she had vexed Mr. Carden by reminding him of the misdeeds of a man whom he had once known, and she also saw that she had been betrayed into saying more than she had intended; she therefore decided not to press for more details. In a little while Mr. Carden's good-humour returned, and he chatted with her in a manner which surprised her. He had not unbent to that extent before!

"You are rather a clever girl, Miss Tyrrell, and it is a pity that your health spoilt you for taking up a position such as the one for which you were trying," he remarked later in the day. "Yet I don't know that *I* regret it, for I should then have lost a valuable assistant. Now, you must help me more in my laboratory work; you are capable of it, I am sure! What do you say to making a beginning this evening?"

"I shall be pleased," cried Doris, with genuine pleasure. "I hope," she added, half in jest, half in earnest, "that I shall not make anything explode!"

"I shall not give you the chance," answered Carden drily.

The girl laughed; she saw only humour in the reply, and missed its real meaning.

It was eight o'clock when Carden summoned Doris to go with him to one of his laboratories. Dinner was over, and they could do a couple of hours work before retiring. He led the way to a far wing of the house, which was never used; servants were permitted to go there to dust and keep the place in some sort of order at frequent intervals, but otherwise nobody ventured there. There was a general notion among the servants that the place was dangerous because Mr. Carden carried out various chemical experiments there, and Carden himself had fostered the notion.

Carden ushered Doris into a long room, which contained many scientific instruments; this apartment was lighted electrically, the current being obtained from accumulators. He shut the door behind him and motioned her to a chair.

"Sit down, while I tell you something!" he said harshly.

Full of wonder at the change which had suddenly come over the man, Doris obeyed mechanically. The usual benevolent smile was gone, the aspect of the face was entirely altered; he stood before her with a diabolical look on his features, which was so unexpected that it paralysed her faculties for the time.

"Fate has aided me," he continued, with a ring of triumph in his voice. "When I advertised for an amanuensis, I did not dream that the successful applicant would prove to be the daughter of the man and woman whom I have hated for a period which may well be called a lifetime. I did not know you under your assumed name, and you do not sufficiently resemble either of your parents to make you recognisable. It was not till the day I went away that I knew anything of your identity. Do you guess mine?"

Doris shivered; the look of mingled horror and disgust told him as plainly as words that she had guessed. She tried to rise from her seat, but she found that she was held tightly in the grasp of the hinged arms of the chair; they had pinned her to her seat.

"You cannot get up, and it will be useless for you to call out!" declared Lucas, for it was he. "Nobody will hear you. This room has no windows and only a narrow skylight, so your cries could not be heard."

"Why are you so cruel to my people and me?" Doris contrived to gasp.

"I hated your father because he always thwarted my plans in some way or other. And I hated, and still hate, your mother because she refused me for *him!* And I can deal your mother a blow through you. I intend to do it. I will tell you how."

He pointed, with apparent inconsistency, to a small packet on the floor close to her feet.

"That packet contains enough to clear your father's name. Think of that! But you will never read it, nor will anyone else. You have learnt too much; you betrayed some of your knowledge when you spoke of the cutting, and I can easily suppose that a clever girl like you has gleaned much more information. I determined when I first came back to play with you and torment you, as a cat does a mouse, but that sort of thing is dangerous with one who has such knowledge.

"I am going to leave you here. I shall cause the room to be filled with a new gas which I have discovered and which has the effect of paralysing the organ of speech and the motor muscles at the same time as it sharpens the feelings and the mental faculties. When this is accomplished you will find the arms of the chair release you, but you will not be able to move.

"You will not be able to call for help even if you should hear some one outside the door.

"Then I shall set fire to this wing. The wind is blowing from the other part of the house, so only this wing will suffer. You will see the flames curling round you, your agony will be immensely intensified, but you will be powerless! And you will perish by an awful death, with your eyes on that packet!"

He almost shouted the last sentences in exultation, and quickly passed out of the room. In a few seconds Doris felt her sense of smell tickled by a peculiar odour, pleasant and soothing in its effects at first. It excited her; she tried to cry out, but her voice failed. In less than two minutes she felt the arms of the chair relax, but she could not move. She lay back in the chair with widely opened eyes and waited.

An ominous crackle struck terror into her heart; it was the beginning of the fire! She waited in agony; the flames came shooting from all parts of the room! Her heart seemed to stand still with fear, but she could not move in the slightest degree.

She knew what would be said. It would go forth to the world that she had meddled with the chemicals unknown to Mr. Carden, or Lucas, and that she had spilt something which had rendered her unconscious and had set fire to the wing. Her charred body would be found, and——

The flames were leaping from the walls towards the ceiling, and now the floor was catching.

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Nearer and nearer the tongues of flame came to her; great beads of perspiration stood upon her face. The fire would soon catch her clothes, but she could do nothing—nothing—except lay there and stare with distended eyes in front of her! How long before the devouring element caught her dress?

She fancied that she heard shouts outside, but probably the presence of the fire was not evident yet. She tried to turn her eyes to the packet, as Carden had said, but she could not move them.

The heat of the fire was affecting her; it would be a mercy if she were rendered unconscious! If not, she would go mad with horror!

Ah! A tongue of flame swept across her hand and was gone. The agony of that instant was terrible, but it proved to be her salvation. It caused her, involuntarily, to make one desperate effort to rise, and the strength of that effort broke the spell of the gas. She found herself on her feet, erect, with the flames dancing about her!

The instinct of self-preservation returned in all its power. She stooped to pick up the packet and dashed to the door, thrusting the packet in her pocket as she did so. The door had not been locked, for Carden had to consider the possibility of the room not being entirely destroyed, and a door locked on the outside would tell awkward tales.

It required some nerve to hold up the skirt on one side so that it protected her face and hair from the flames, and thus rush to the door and fling it open, but Doris did it with firmly-set lips, and emerged into the corridor with a tiny tongue of flame burning a hole in her skirt. With great presence of mind she lay down and rolled over and over, extinguishing the fire and then sped down the corridor for freedom.

A thousand thoughts surged through her heated brain; Carden might be at the end, waiting to strike her down and take her back to the burning laboratory! She did not stop, however, but sped on till she reached the inhabited portion of the building. The place seemed deserted, so she concluded that the inmates had become aware of the fire, and were outside.

Here was her chance of escape with the precious packet in her possession! Carden, in aiming at the refinement of cruelty by causing her to die a terrible death within reach of the evidence she so longed to possess, had this time over-reached himself, as villains often do!

Doris would not lose time by repairing to her own room in order to obtain hat and cloak. She hurried out of the building by a back door, and ran through the grounds to the open country. As she broke her way through the hedge which formed the confines of Carden's estate, she heard a sound behind her; the next instant there was a sharp report and something struck the hedge quite close to her head. She divined the meaning of this; Carden had discovered her escape, and had so far forgotten his caution as to fire at her with his revolver!

Doris raced along the country lane for dear life; she knew that Carden would show her no mercy. The lane was a very tortuous one, so that she could keep clear of his bullets by maintaining an advance of only a few yards; but when she reached the end of this lane——?

She dared not think of that! Yet it was soon brought to her mind with full force, for in a couple of minutes she was in an open road at right angles with the lane, and she could hear the rush of footsteps behind her!

She ran on wildly, straining every muscle to maintain the pace, but her pursuer gained on her at every step. Panting, struggling onwards, stumbling, she reached the bridge over the railway line. She stumbled and collided with the buttress. A shout of triumph came from Carden. He sprang at her with outstretched hands to grasp her, and then——

He started back in horror, for Doris, with a wild despairing cry, had made use of her gymnasium training to scramble on to the parapet. For a moment she stood there, looking down at the metals, twenty feet below; then she gathered herself together and sprang forward from the bridge!

Even Carden uttered a cry of compassion as he started forward to catch at her dress, for he had heard what Doris had not and what had escaped her eyes, despite the bright moonlight which made everything almost as visible as in the daytime—a train which was rattling round the bend and towards the bridge!

The driver saw the dark object fall from the bridge right on the very line which his engine would soon pass over, and he involuntarily blew his whistle and tried to pull the train up in time, but it had passed under the bridge several yards before he could bring it to a standstill.

"I didn't feel anything, but he or she must be as dead as a door nail!" he told his fireman. "We must ha' gone clean over her!"

The guards went back along the line, followed by three or four of the male passengers who had heard what had happened. They found a woman lying between the two metals, unhurt save for a sprained ankle, but in a swoon; the train had passed over her without touching her.

"Phew!" whistled a guard. "She dropped lucky, and her swoon prevented her from moving, or I expect she'd have tried to get up and escape, and she'd ha' been settled!"

"Great Heavens!" cried one of the passengers. "It's Doris!"

The speaker was Austin Howard. Mrs. Tyrrell had told him of the visit of Lucas and of Doris' letter, and Howard had tracked the scoundrel to Inverness. There he had lost him, and was now on a wrong track, believing that he had a clue, when he was thus strangely brought face to face with Doris.

In order not to further delay the train, Doris was placed in the only vacant first-class compartment and there restored to consciousness while the train rattled onwards. She sobbed hysterically when she saw Austin and clung to him, but he calmed her, and they alighted at the first stop.

There she told her story, and at dawn the police were in possession of information which sent them in search of Carden, formerly Lucas, while Doris telegraphed to her mother to allay any fears which she might have if news of the fire reached her.

Later information from Eskadell showed that the wind had veered and carried the flames to the other portion of the house, with the result that it had been completely destroyed.

Carden, returning after he had seen Doris jump on the line, found the edifice burning furiously; he had made a desperate attempt to save certain property, entering the flaming building against the advice of all, and had been caught by the flames in an upper room, and had perished within sight of his servants and the local firemen, who were powerless to help.

Thus he had died the same terrible death as he had intended for Doris.

Little remains to be told. The small packet contained notes made by Lucas himself, a kind of confession of what he had done to ruin Dr. Seymour—a confession written gloatingly and in order to increase his delight at what he was doing and had done! The papers had a thumbed appearance, showing that he had often re-read them in later years, doubtless gloating over them every time!

Full justice was done to the memory of Dr. Seymour; the Tyrrells assumed their real name, and the clouds lifted from the horizon, showing a bright future. For Austin Howard had ample means, and he absolutely refused to await the expiration of the six months' probation! And, it must be admitted, neither Mrs. Seymour nor Doris was very pressing on that point.

G. Hubert.

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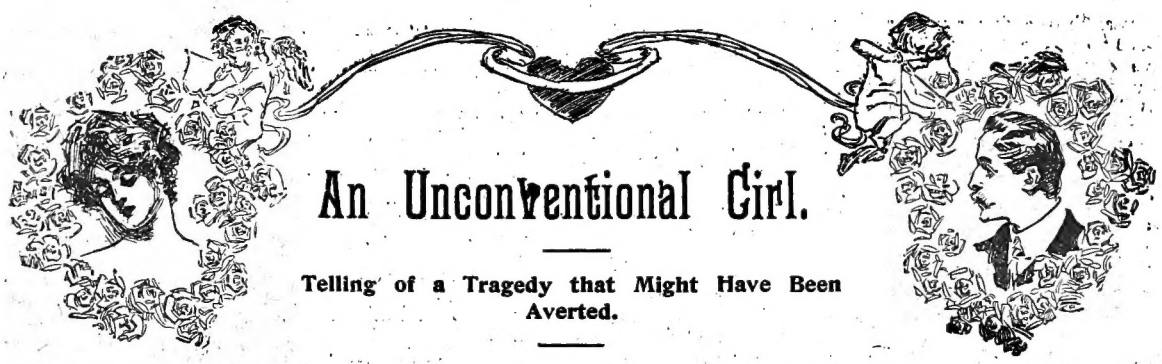

An Unconventional Girl.

Telling of a Tragedy that Might Have Been Averted.

"Look!" cried Mrs. Jephson-Hawes. "Good gracious! look at that girl!"

The good lady rustled all over with indignation.

Her companions were a tall, aristocratic young girl, in a simple black satin dress, straight in its folds, clinging in its outline as the drapery of a statue, its sombre hue only relieved by three strings of amber beads wound closely about her throat; with a broad black plush hat and long black plumes drooping over the pale, fair, high-bred face; and the other a handsome young Englishman with dark eyes and that languid air supposed to be "good form" in exclusive circles.

Howard Winthrop looked with a dawning interest kindling in his eyes at the girl whom Mrs. Jephson-Hawes indicated.

It was a fresh October evening and Venice was all aglow with light and sparkle.

Our friends were looking at a gondola near them, in which stood a young girl, her slight figure thrown out in relief against the sky. The sun had set, but the after-glow was still there; the water beneath was sheeted silver, the breeze had grown fresh, and blew full against the lithe young figure, whose heliotrope silk dress was of a soft, clinging kind. It had the beauty of falling in soft folds, and it seemed to cling caressingly to the well-rounded, supple limbs of this girl who stood with the oar in her hand propelling the gondola herself, while the gondolier looked on with a surprised grin upon his face. The light upon the flushed face showed intense and vivid colouring and all the charms of youth and health, added to a sort of radiant independence of everybody and everything. The bronze-gold hair that hung in a bewitching, soft, curly fringe almost down to the violet eyes, was carelessly blown by the wind, and the long old-gold feather that decorated a plush hat of the same colour swept out like a meteor upon the breeze.

"I knew I could do it, mamma," she said to a pale, delicate-looking woman whose plain grey dress formed the greatest contrast to her daughter's. "It only needs practice to do anything."

Howard Winthrop could not resist the thrill of admiration that ran like a subtle electric fire through his whole being. The fresh, unconventional attitude, the radiant health and youth, the vigour, the fire.

At that moment the long feather, having lost its hold in the rude struggle with the wind, fluttered away like some bright-winged bird, and sailing along for a moment with a sort of giddy delight in its freedom, dropped suddenly and softly as a golden shadow at the young man's feet.

He seized it rapturously but tenderly, and hastened nearer the water's edge. The flight had been noticed, and the gondola was turned towards the land.

The young lady looked about her as it stopped, and, having discerned a very handsome young man with her plume in his hand, she smiled a bewitching smile.

"It was carried to my feet," Howard said, bowing.

"She's terrible for losing her things," said the mother, in a plaintive voice, hovering near, like a moth about a gorgeous butterfly. "Nothing ever stays on her that can get away."

"I would call that an evidence of the depravity of inanimate things," said Howard, with an admiring glance.

The mother looked puzzled. The daughter laughed.

"They come back, you see," she said.

"I should think they would," answered Howard. "I'm sure I wish I might."

He was quite shocked at his own boldness, but perhaps more so at the girl's answer.

"I wish you would; we don't know anyone here."

Yet her face was so frank and ingenuous that he could not think evil of her cordiality.

"I should be glad to be of service to you in any way," he answered cordially. "I know Venice pretty well, for this is my third visit."

"We are not at a hotel but at a *pension*, and it's very dull," she said. "We stayed one night at a place in the Plaza San Marco, but the people never go to bed there, and mamma could not sleep. We are abroad for her health, and so we had to find a quiet place, and it *is* quiet—oh, deadly quiet!"

Howard suddenly recollected his companions who were waiting for him, and drew out his card. The mother produced one of hers, and feebly seconded her daughter's invitation. The whole proceeding struck the young man as curious and unconventional in the extreme as he walked back to his party. While he had looked at the radiant vision it seemed correct and proper.

"They don't know me. I might be a blackleg and an adventurer. I hope they don't admit everyone so carelessly. The girl is so beautiful."

And he experienced a sort of pang at the fear that anyone else should be taken into their acquaintance in the same unconventional manner.

"I can be of real service to them," he said to himself as he took out the cards and read

MRS. JOHN STIRLING MISS DULCIE STIRLING.

"Dulcie."

What an odd diminutive, yet it had a soft clinging music about it that thrilled him. It was singing itself over and over again in his brain when he came upon Mrs. Jephson-Hawes, looking very stately and sedate, and Miss Mabel with an additional frosting in her face and manner.

"Really, Howard, that very unconventional person seemed to have something to say to you," said the elder lady.

But Howard did not satisfy the curiosity that was evident. He only bestirred himself to procure a gondola, and in a few moments they were afloat on the smooth, shining water. It was not yet dark, the after-glow had not faded.

The golden lamps shone out like golden flowers against the deep violet shadows. Domes and spires came out distinctly in that light, and all the serried masts of the merchant fleet at the mouth of the Quidecca stood up like lances. So they glided on till the darkness fell and a pale crescent moon rose "like a silver sickle in a field of stars."

But Howard Winthrop was thinking of none of these things. He saw instead a slight figure in a pale purple gown, with a vivacious, sparkling face and wind-blown, bronze hair. "She's awfully pretty, but 'bad form.'" he decided as he lit his cigarette that night. Yet she had taken possession of his fancy, and seemed quite at home there.

No one could have been more astonished than our hero

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himself when a few evenings after this he found himself drifting over the sheeted silver of those same waters with the enchantress herself. How it had come about was not exactly clear to him; but it seemed as if the invitation had come from Miss Dulcie herself, and that her mother had failed at the last moment.

"We hire the gondola by the week," the young lady had volunteered, "and it's a pity to send it away, with such a moonlight too."

So Winthrop found himself at her side, feeling as if he were sailing in an enchanted boat on an enchanted sea.

"Mamma gets tired so soon," she said to him frankly, "that I have to go about alone. One hour in a picture gallery uses her up, and she doesn't remember anything about it, poor dear; so what's the use."

"But you are too young, and, excuse me, too pretty, to go about without a chaperon," said Winthrop, looking at the effects of moonlight on the glowing face that bloomed like a flower in that pallid light.

She wore a dress of Vandyke blue velvet, with a cape of white Spanish lace carelessly tied over it. About her neck was a quaint collar of filigree silver, and on her arms bracelets of the same delicate frostwork. A Rembrandt hat of blue plush, with a long blue feather, held in place by a bird's silver claw, shaded, but did not conceal, the glory of her ruddy hair.

It gave Winthrop a sort of pang that he could not explain to look at her and think of her freedom.

It was not the proper thing at all.

"They have such musty, fusty ideas nowadays," she said, smiling brightly up in his face. "I rather like to shock them. Perhaps I shock you too?"

"Would you enjoy that?" the young man asked evasively.

"Oh, no! I would rather you approved of me; though"—with a mutinous and bewitching smile—"I don't know that I would give up my own way to bring that about. I've been a good deal spoilt—you have seen that. I know. The doctors told mamma long ago, when I was a child, that if I was opposed I would burst a blood-vessel and die. I'm afraid I've made use of her fear to get my own way. It's an ignoble confession to make, isn't it?"

"Yet you look extremely healthy," he answered in a sceptical tone. "I own I should be tempted some time to oppose you. It's not a good thing for any human soul to meet with no opposition."

"Well, mamma consoles herself for her own weakness by thinking I may have a strong hand to rule me one of these days. She takes the most dismal views of matrimony, do you know, and says, 'Poor dear! she will suffer enough one of these days. Let her enjoy life now.'"

"But you? I trust your views are more rose-coloured," said Winthrop, feeling his heart beat more rapidly and half despising himself for it.

What was this strange, impulsive creature to him?

"I? Oh, yes! I have my own dreams—what girl has not? I do not believe life is so leaden-hued as some say. The poets are particularly to blame for that, I think. They should be crowned with cypress, instead of laurel, for all the dismal songs of grief and gloom they have perpetrated. But I have not seen the Fairy Prince yet—at least, I think I have not"—with a mischievous look into Winthrop's eyes. "You know I am not eighteen yet."

Winthrop thought it would be hard to find a girl more emancipated.

"I predict all bright things for you," he said; "let me look at your hand. I learnt palmistry once from an Arab."

The girl frankly held out her hand; it was rosy-white and dimpled. Its soft touch, as it lay in his own, thrilled Winthrop from head to foot.

"The line of life is——"

He hesitated. He knew it was all nonsense, but he felt his heart sink as he saw that mystic line so suddenly broken on the little rose-lined hand.

"Well, what is it? Shall I die soon? That will be when my husband contradicts me, I know."

Winthrop rallied and spoke gaily.

"You will have a long life, a rich husband, and always have your own way. Here is a dark man who loves you."

It was quite in the approved gipsy style, and Dulcie nodded.

"Oh, yes. I know the dark man."

"What?" exclaimed Winthrop in surprise. "I thought you knew no one."

"Oh, he is an Italian count we met at Trouville in the summer—a dark, gloomy fellow, with magnificent eyes. He has a history."

"They all have."

"He is very poor."

"They all are."

"And he talks English in a broken way, and in a low, musical voice. He was teaching me Italian, and I am going on with the lessons when I get to Naples. He lives in Naples."

"Ah!"

Winthrop could not account for the jealous pang that stabbed his heart.

"Mamma has been in constant terror lest I should fall in love with him on account of the romance of the thing; and I'm afraid of foreigners. I feel that Count Torriani could do any one of those dark deeds we read about in Italian romances; but there *is* an interest in being with a man who adores you," with a bright glance.

Winthrop winced.

"So he adores you and tells you so?"

"Oh, yes. He reads me sonnets full of volcanic passion. He accounts for my indifference by believing that I am too young to be fully awakened to the best happiness of life."

"And you go about with him?" Winthrop asked in a dumb fury.

"Certainly. He is splendid-looking and a perfect gentleman. Besides, he knows his country as a foreigner could not do; and he appears to feel so much that I cannot crush him at a blow—can I, now?"

Winthrop felt himself growing hard and cold.

"You can only decide that for yourself," he said.

Somehow the rest of the sail seemed to have lost its enchantment. They landed and climbed the sandy ridges that glisten in the silvery light.

Every pool is a molten mirror. Before them lay the placid lagoon, on one side a line of dark blue, with creamy waves crawling lazily upon the shore. It was the Adriatic.

It was in vain that Winthrop tried to withdraw himself from the subtle charm of Dulcie's society. In vain he repeated to himself that she was too unconventional and too impulsive for that strict, cold London circle to which he belonged.

Mrs. Jephson-Hawes shrugged her shoulders at the very mention of the girl, and Mrs. Jephson-Hawes was the autocrat of his society. She had voted Miss Dulcie "crude—crude in the extreme," and there was scarcely a more significant term in that lady's vocabulary.

There was Mabel, a truly high-bred and perfect specimen of conventional breeding—a girl whose voice, musically modulated, was never raised above the regulation tone, whose step, floating and graceful, was never quickened by impulse, whose manner was cool and quiet and charming, but she charmed Winthrop no more.

He found himself longing for Dulcie's changing, ringing, tones. There was everything in her voice—appeal, merriment, melancholy, tenderness—it was as changeful as her eyes, her face, her whole manner. She was never the same—a perpetual study, an eternal delight. She fascinated him.

He spent all the time when he was away from her in stealing his heart against her, but with the first glance into her fearless bright eyes all his panoply fell from him, and he became her slave.

And so at last they found themselves together in Naples, and a new personage appeared on the scene.

The tall, dark, melancholy nobleman, who expressed a whole record of past grandeur and fallen fortunes in his sallow, pathetic face and sombre, dark eyes, was seen everywhere with Dulcie.

Her mother seemed to keep in the background as persistently as if she were indeed a moth and shunned the daylight.

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When the Count saw Winthrop, an antagonism seemed to spring up at once in his breast. He discerned a rival, and hated him from that moment.

As for our hero, he ground his teeth in impotent rage when he saw his charmer leaning upon the Count's arm, looking up with a bright smile into his face, and listening to his broken sentences, as if they were the wisdom of the gods. He tried remonstrating with feeble Mrs. Stirling, who was just at that moment engrossed in a new symptom, and indifferent to all else.

"It gives rise to remark," he said, "unless a young lady is engaged to the gentleman."

"Oh, dear me!" she wailed; "don't ask me to interfere. Dulcie does as she likes; she always has—she always will; I haven't the nerve to control her—and, after all, I am sure of her, Mr. Winthrop. She is very independent, but she always will do right—I have that confidence in her. Do you know any remedy for neuralgia?"

Winthrop answered somewhat wildly, and got away in a discouraged mood. He must speak to the young lady herself. Most girls are keenly alive to rumour; and perhaps he might alarm her sufficiently to make her throw aside the languishing Count, who infuriated him so with his adoring airs.

It was a lovely sunset. As Winthrop stepped out upon the terrace between the sculptured vases full of trailing flowers, he saw a view which is, perhaps, the most famous in the world; the bay, like a shining crescent, lay before him, purple and emerald in the shadow of rocky headlands. The fishing-barks, with their white wings, looked like birds asleep on the blue waters.

There was a flicker of amber among the trailing ivies beneath him, and he hurried towards it. Dulcie was sitting there, idly picking some flowers to bits; a mosaic of bright leaves lay over her dress.

"So you serve the offerings of your victims?" he said grimly.

"Oh, they are from the Count. I couldn't keep all he gives me."

"Does it never strike you that you might stop it, if you don't care for it?" Winthrop asked, somewhat brusquely.

Dulcie opened her lovely eyes.

"But suppose it is not altogether unpleasant?"

"Oh, in that case it is quite correct, otherwise it might be better not to give rise to surmises that may be incorrect and injurious."

There was a slight rigidity about Dulcie's mouth and a little tremor in her voice.

"And why should *you* care?"

With those lovely eyes raised to his, the fresh young lips so near, the slender form within his reach, Winthrop's self-possession deserted him. A thicket of ivy and myrtle screened them from sight. He forgot everything but the rapturous beating of his own heart. In a second he had snatched her to his breast, and pressed a sudden kiss upon the scarlet lips.

"Because I love you, darling!" he murmured.

The golden-bronze head lay on his shoulder one second, while Dulcie said artlessly:

"Oh, I am glad, glad!" when a sudden rustle startled them. The Count stood glowering at them with gloomy eyes.

The Count stood glowering at them with gloomy eyes.

Winthrop started back, with a sudden impulse to knock him down, there was so much hate in the dark face. But he restrained himself—perhaps the man had done him a service. He had interrupted a passing frenzy; yes, that was what our unworthy hero styled his unpremeditated confession.

"Leave me," Dulcie whispered. "I must speak to him. I can calm the wild beast in him, I am sure."

Winthrop was glad to go away. He felt quite breathless with the plunge he had taken. It was all over now—too late to escape.

Was it too late? He had been betrayed into a sudden declaration and a kiss. Well! Dulcie had heard many such, and had been kissed before, very likely. A girl so very unconventional—no, somehow Winthrop could not wrong her in his mind.

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What was a kiss? He felt the touch yet upon his lips—light as rose leaf yet glowing as flame. Should he give up all for that kiss? Dulcie was sweet and bewitching, but she was not the wife for him. She was crude, "undeniably crude."

He felt, somehow, all the harder to her that he had been betrayed into that weakness. He had looked upon himself as a self-centred fellow, who had himself well in hand; this undisciplined rebound of his nature was owing to her.

Her unfettered nature had worked upon his own to his detriment; he must shake off the fetters.

He nerved himself to the task, and sat down to write. He would not see her again—he dared not. The very memory of her witchery stole to him like a subtle and bewildering perfume. He must write.

Never was task so hard. Over and over again he attempted and tore into bits the unsatisfying result.

Now it was diffuse and kind; now it was too short and cold. At last he kept one in despair.

It ran as follows:

"MY DEAR MISS DULCIE—*I am called away so suddenly that I fear I shall not have the happiness of seeing you again. Forgive me for the liberty I took this afternoon. I cannot forgive myself. Believe me, the feeling was not feigned; but I scorn myself for the weakness that betrayed me into an expression of interest that I cannot indulge. Circumstance, our own spheres in Society and the fitness of things, must all be consulted as well as that treacherous organ—the human heart. Make my adieux kindly to your mother. With best wishes for yourself, I am,*

"*Yours very humbly and repentantly,*

"HOWARD WINTHROP."

When the young man had dispatched this note he began to pack hurriedly. He had not the nerve to meet the girl again after having sent it.

He resolved to wait till it was dark, and then to go. He could trump up some reason for the Jephson-Hawes.

The night was singularly alive and bright. Winthrop noticed that Vesuvius' plume had grown into a column; it grew beneath his eye, piling itself mass on mass. As he gazed, it was no longer a plume, but an arch that spanned half the horizon.

It grew rosy, fire-tipped. The dark billows were rose-crowned, the sombre mountains of smoke were flame-capped. The mountain was in eruption.

He paused to look. The sight charmed him and made him forget his journey for the moment.

There was a trembling in the earth, in the air. Then a volley of black vapour shot up, rent with veins of fire, like a cloud veined with lightning, and streams of lava—seething, liquid flame—began crawling down the cone.

Standing so transfixed, Winthrop had forgotten everything. He was not aware of a dark shadow stealing behind him, or of the glitter of steel flashing near. Only when he hears a woman's cry and feels two round, young arms about his neck, does he realise that someone is crashing away through the shrubbery, and that Dulcie has fainted in his arms.

He lifted her to a long, rustic seat near by, and realised for the first time that he has stopped near the garden—nay, that they are on the very spot where he had kissed her that very day. She lay there now, pale as the stone statue that stood near, and he suddenly saw with a cold horror that there was blood streaming over her white dress.

But the lovely eyes were open for a moment, and an arm stole about his neck again.

"I saved you, did I not, darling? You are not hurt?"

"No, no!—but you? I do not understand."

"It is a scratch. But the Count's dagger was aimed at your heart. I have saved you—that is joy enough."

Then she fainted dead away again, and he was aware that the attendants were thronging about them—that the mother was hovering with feeble moans over her daughter, that a medical gentleman was examining the wound.

"It is not serious," he said.

Then Winthrop gave her up to other hands with a sickening feeling of reluctance, and she was carried into the house.

He paced the garden-walks a long time, but scarcely looked at the wondrous panorama before him. Only he felt as if he, too, had undergone some strange convulsion of nature, as if a torrent of seething lava coursed through his veins instead of blood.

"And I have been ready to cast away such a love!" he groaned; "a love that could fling away life as a worthless thing for my sake. Oh, my darling, forgive me! I know I cannot live without you now!"

Suddenly, the memory of the letter stabbed him like a dagger. It had not reached her, evidently, before she had left the house. His messenger had indeed stopped on the way to do a little courting on his own account.

"Oh, fool that I have been!" he cried, starting into a hurried walk. "My doom is certain if she sees that. She would never forgive that cold, heartless letter!—my proud darling!"

He hurried up to the hotel, hoping it might not yet have been delivered. He felt as if he would give ten years of his life to get that scrap of paper in his hand once more. He had some hope as he asked for Mrs. Stirling.

There seemed an unusual bustle about the halls. A flurried look in people's faces. Mrs. Stirling did not come to him. He made his way to their parlour. The door stood open.

"Is she worse?" he asked, as he caught Mrs. Stirling hurrying by. "Is the wound more serious than the doctor thought?"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, go away!" moaned the mother. "She has broken a blood-vessel, the doctor says. It is not the wound at all, only he says the excitement may have brought it on. She was quite calm, and was reading a note that someone brought her. The effect on her was terrible in the extreme.

"There is no hope. I cannot be calm, and so they will not let me stay with her. Oh, God, have mercy upon me! No—no, you must not go in."

But Howard Winthrop heeded nothing. He strode onwards to the couch upon which they had laid the wounded girl. She was ghastly white but conscious, and turned from him with a shudder.

He forgot conventionality then. It mattered not to him that his conduct was "bad form." He dropped on his knees at the bedside, and gasped out:

"Forget it, Dulcie, it is not true. I have found out my own heart now, and know that you are my life. I love you—before Heaven I love you!"

She lifted languid eyes to him, and the shadow of a smile touched her pallid lips.

"I told you that I had never been crossed in my life. You see, when it came I could not bear it. I am going to die, because I cannot have my own way. I am a poor, weak creature, after all."

"You are heroic," cried Howard, with a great sob in his throat; "do not slip away from me now, when I know your worth. Oh, darling! God has angels enough without you. Tell me—tell me you forgive!"

She held out the crushed slip of paper she still held in her hand.

"Take it," she whispered faintly. "I forgive—and believe—in spite—of all—that you love me."

A grey pallor settled on her face, and Winthrop was hustled from the room to pace his own floor till the sudden hush that falls on all earthly sounds when one Presence enters settled down over all. He knew that he had thrown away the most priceless boon ever offered to man, that he had murdered his own happiness for ever.

A voice followed him with a ceaseless cadence of pain, saying always: "It might have been. It might have been."

Helen Pierson.

LADY NOVELIST: "Darling, I have been untrue to you. I love another." Husband: "W-h-a-t!" Lady Novelist: "Calm yourself, dear; calm yourself. That is only what my heroine says to her husband, and I wanted to see how the husband would act."

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Unsolved Love Problems.

A Prize of One Guinea is offered to the reader who sends in the most Satisfactory Solution to the Problem. Replies should not exceed one hundred words. See "Your Editor Chats."

VII.—THE ENGAGEMENT OF EDITH SARGEANT.

"INDEED, Wilfred, you make it very difficult for me to refuse you."

The speaker was a tall, fair-haired girl who was sitting on a sofa in a charmingly furnished drawing-room, and looking up at the grave, clerically-attired man who stood before her.

"That is naturally what I desire to do," he replied to her naïve remark, with a smile of singular sweetness.

"Oh," cried Edith a little impatiently, "what good would it do you if I married you and did not love you?"

"But you would in time," he insisted; "I am patient and I have learnt to wait. We have known each other since we were children together, and I am perfectly certain we are exactly suited to one another."

"Oh, yes, that is what mother says—a very suitable match, my dear—but I don't want only a suitable match—I don't want to marry a man unless I love him so much that I can't help myself."

"Edith," said the man, going a shade paler under his weather-beaten skin, "what do you know of love? If you do not love me like that, is there anyone else that you do?"

Edith flushed, and averted her head.

"Whom should I love?" she cried with a forced laugh. "I have not had an offer since Jack Osborne went abroad and got engaged on the way out, and this is being absurdly frank, is it not?"

And he was satisfied.

"Then," he cried, "if there is no one else I am content. Give what you can now, and I will teach you to love me more in time."

"But how can I tell if I shall ever love you more?"

"You will," he replied with a certainty that a man, even of his force of character, should dread to take upon him, and he seated himself beside her and took one of her hands in his.

Wilfred Arlington was not young, his hair was grey at the temples, and there were lines about his eyes and firm, compressed mouth, but he was young for a bishop, even a Colonial bishop, and Edith, who had sat on his knee as a golden-haired child, had still some of the awe left with which she had regarded the tall, grave clergyman, mixed now with admiration for his intellectual powers, and the rapid way in which he had come to the front.

She was flattered that he should seek her for his wife, and the thought of exchanging the narrow life of a cathedral close for the larger, wider existence of a bishopric in Greater Britain was very attractive to her, and she could not help being aware that had she never met Dr. Clinton she would not have hesitated to accept gladly what was offered her, and indeed to return his love with interest. There was only one thing she desired more than that she should love Wilfred Arlington, and that was that Maurice Clinton should love her.

And yet she was hardly aware of it; she had not been consciously telling an untruth when she gave him to understand that there was no one else, though a certain sub-consciousness had caused her to fence with the question. For the past six months she had not dared to question her feelings.

She had met Maurice at a friend's house, and they had immediately become friends. A friendship so devoid of flirtation, or any approach to sentiment, that she had not liked to refuse when he suggested they should write occasionally to one another, lest she should seem to put it on a different footing, and to be refusing what had never been offered.

A few letters had passed between them, but until Wilfred Arlington's declaration of love had caused her to inquire into the state of her feelings, she had never even wondered whether Dr. Clinton loved her, or she him. And now all that she knew was, that had she never met him she would undoubtedly have loved Wilfred.

Meanwhile, the bishop was watching her with more anxiety than she imagined. He loved her very deeply, but he thought it wisest not to show it too much lest she should be frightened, and afraid of the responsibility of accepting so much love.

"Edith," he said at last, drawing her closer to him, "will you not let me try to make you love me?"

And Edith, terrified lest she should have given her heart where it was not wanted, looked up into his earnest, deep-set, grey eyes, and said:

"Yes, make me love you, and I will gladly give my life into your safe keeping."

"Thank God," he cried with fervour, and before she could draw back he had kissed her on the lips.

By her instinctive shrinking Edith knew she did not love him, and she feared what she had done.

"No—no——" she cried wildly, pushing him away. "Do not kiss me again, I can promise nothing. Wait—wait, only wait, and I will try to love you. Give me time—six weeks—a month; I cannot answer you now at once."

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"As you will, my dear," said he a little wearily, for he began to see it is a terrible thing to give all your heart and get so little in return. "I have to return to Aralong in six weeks' time, so at the end of a fortnight I will come to you for my answer."

Thankful to him for his kindness and patience, Edith felt almost light-hearted when she bade him farewell at the little gate between the close-cut hedges of yew.

She would write to Dr. Clinton, and she would tell him of the offer she had had without mentioning any names, merely putting down her indecision to her doubt whether she was fitted to be a clergyman's wife, and whether she could bear to leave her country and all her friends. According to his reply she would know if he loved her or no. If he did, then the heavens themselves opened before her, and if he did not, then shame to her for having allowed her love to go unasked; she would cast all thought of him out of her heart and she would—yes, she determined she would—love this good man who so truly loved her.

She wrote her letter, she put the case before her friend, she asked his advice, and she sat down to wait.

At the end of a week no word had come, and her heart sank within her, for, as she argued:

"If he loved me he would have written at once, lest I should accept the offer, but if he only regards me as a friend he will wait a while to think it over that he may be sure to give me the right advice."

So for a time she was humbled to the dust, and then pride came to her aid, and she determined no one should ever guess she had given her love where only friendship was asked.

Just at the psychological moment came the bishop, and he said:

"Edith, I promised you a fortnight to think over my offer. I have just received a letter which makes it imperative I should return to my diocese, Aralong, next week. Will you not promise yourself to me now that I may go about my work with a heart at peace?"

While Edith resented his assumption that only one answer was possible, it showed her that by asking him to wait she had given him the right to hope, and the yearning look in his eyes, and the strained lines about his mouth, as of a man suffering great anxiety, made her feel she was not treating him quite fairly, so she said:

"I do not think I shall know more at the end of a fortnight than I do now. I do not think I love you yet, but I want to, and I have a very real affection for you, and if you will have me on those terms, I will marry you and try to make you a good wife."

Wilfred folded her in his arms saying in a voice deep with feeling:

"I am not afraid if there is no one you love better. You do not know how glad you have made me, for, next to my God, I love you, Edith, and you *shall* be happy."

Having thus cast the die, Edith was much happier. She was now fortified against the sting of the perfectly friendly advice from Dr. Clinton that she expected to get. There was even a certain amount of satisfaction that she would be able to tell him she had decided before she heard from him. He did not love her, she would marry the bishop, and, secure in her love for her husband, would only think of Maurice Clinton as a friend.

For the next two or three days Edith was kept busy receiving congratulations. Everyone was pleased with the engagement, both on her side and on his, and she grew very proud of her *fiancé* and quite convinced that she had done the best thing for herself, while the bishop was so quietly radiant that she was humbly grateful she could bestow so much happiness with so little effort. She did not allow her thoughts to dwell on Maurice Clinton in those days.

The afternoon visitors had gone, and Mrs. Sargeant had retired to write the great news to relatives at a distance, while Edith, a little weary of smiling and talking, sat thinking dreamily how good a man she was going to marry, and how wonderful it was he should love such a very ordinary person as herself in whom others found no attraction.

Suddenly the door opened and the manservant announced:

"Dr. Clinton!"

And not till then did she realise he had been in her thoughts.

Maurice came forward eagerly with outstretched hands.

"Miss Sargeant, I have not been able to come before, but here I am now to answer your letter in person."

The beating of her heart almost suffocated her, and Edith could only stammer:

"Why—why—did you not come before?"

"Oh, well, a chapter of accidents," he said. "First of all I was away for a few days, and then when I returned and got your letter there was a most important operation I was obliged to perform on a patient. It was two days before she was fit for it, and I have only now been able to pronounce her out of immediate danger and leave her to my partner, because—because I dared not delay any longer."

As he spoke he had been anxiously scanning her white face and what he saw there made him start forward and seize both her hands:

"Edith, Edith—tell me—I am not too late! You have not decided?"

She could only bow her head, and show the ring on her hand; she felt she could not have spoken a word to save her life.

Maurice fell into a chair like one stunned, then he said:

"It was a matter of life and death for that young girl, and I could not in humanity leave her, and now I am too late, oh, my God!" And he buried his face in his hands with a groan.

It needed no actual words to tell Edith that this man loved her even as she loved him, and her crushed pride reared its head from the dust where it had lain since she thought she had given her heart unsought.

She put out a pitiful hand and touched his shoulder.

"Why did you not write?" she asked.

"Because I was a fool! Because I wanted to tell you with my own lips how I have grown to love you till you are as a very part of myself. Because I thought we were so much one, it was impossible for you to love anyone else. Fool that I was, while I hesitated to spoil the crown of my joy by a letter I lost it altogether." Then he turned to her wildly:

"Surely I am not to be so terribly punished because I stayed to fulfil my duty as a doctor? Edith, you love me; surely you do. Is there *no* hope for me?"

Poor Edith, the words that would have brought her joy a month sooner, now gave her only pain, but she would not avow her love for one man while the affianced wife of another, so she replied with a touching dignity:

"Dr. Clinton, you are ungenerous. I have promised to marry my old friend, Bishop Arlington, you cannot expect me to say that I love *you*."

"You are quite right," said Maurice, regaining his self-control, "I ask your pardon. It was the suddenness of the blow that made me lose my head. I only distress you—I will go. Good-bye, Edith!" And he took her hand and gazed wistfully at her. "If — but, no, I will say no more—it must lie entirely in your hands. I know you will do what is right," and raising her hand to his lips he left the room.

So Edith was left alone to face the situation.

At the knowledge that Maurice loved her, all her love for him that might have died away, awoke in fierce intensity, and she knew now that whoever she married it would be Maurice Clinton alone that she loved.

She had given her word to the bishop, could she take it back again? Could she take her happiness at the price of his? And yet would it be right for her to marry him when she loved another?

L. Hughes.

HANDWRITING DENOTES YOUR CHARACTER.

And if you wish to learn what this is send a specimen of your handwriting, together with six penny stamps and a stamped addressed envelope to Baner, 23 Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C. A reliable delineation of your character will be sent in return.

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SPLENDID NEW SERIES. **BEGIN READING TO-DAY.**

DECOYED!

Told by the Decoy Herself.

A Striking Series of Astonishing Revelations.

SYNOPSIS.

VIVIENNE D'ALTON, who in this series tells the story of a certain period of her life, is a young lady who has been educated in Germany.

Until the time when the story commences, she had never seen her father since he placed her at the school in Bochum, although her fees are paid regularly and she has a liberal allowance of pocket-money.

Her mother is dead, and she has no brother or sister. Hence, she seems quite alone in the world.

But one day her father sends a message to the school that he wishes his daughter to leave and to meet him at Rotterdam. Vivienne is greatly delighted at the news, and while she sails down the Rhine to meet her father, conjectures as to his appearance.

The person who announces himself as her father at Rotterdam is not in the least like the handsome gentleman she had pictured to herself, but is short and stout.

They drive to a large mansion, where Vivienne is enthusiastically welcomed by a Mrs. Sherwood, "a bosom friend of her mother," who requests Vivienne to call her "aunt."

Vivienne takes an instantaneous dislike to "Aunt Flora."

A Mr. Gilbert Graysworthy comes to dine at the house, and incidentally mentions that round his waist he carries a belt containing fifty thousand pounds' worth of diamonds.

A day or two later Vivienne is shocked to learn that Gilbert Graysworthy has been found murdered in the street! There seems no motive for the crime, for his money, his watch and chain are still upon his body. Who could the murderer be?

SECOND EPISODE.

I Journey to England.

THE dreadful news imparted so suddenly was such a frightful shock to me that I could neither speak nor move for some time. I could only lean back in my chair, feeling sick at heart, and trembling all over. Looking at my aunt, I expected to find her equally agitated, for it is a terrible thing to hear of the murder of a man whom you have welcomed to your table but a few short hours since.

But, having by a gesture dismissed the maid, Mrs. Sherwood displayed very little concern, and I think my stillness deceived her as to my real feelings, for she observed, in a callous tone: "What a mercy it is that he did not join us last evening, after all! People might have thought we had had something to do with the poor man's death, if he had been seen last in our company."

"Oh, how can you be so heartless?" I exclaimed passionately. "Fancy hearing of a horrible thing like that and thinking only of yourself. It's absolutely disgusting!"

Aunt Flora, for just a second, looked angry enough to kill me. But the anger disappeared like a flash, and she replied, with sweet self-restraint:

"My dear child, when you have lived as long as I have, and have seen as much of the world as I have, you will not be unreasonable enough to expect youth and age to show their emotions in exactly the same way. And when you have seen more of human nature, you will not run away with the idea that your heart and your judgment are so much better than those of other people."

I suppose I ought to have apologised for my rudeness when met by such an obviously sensible argument as this. But I am of an obstinate turn of mind, for I retorted, with scarcely less warmth of manner than I had displayed before:

"All the same, I've seen enough of the world to know that growing old does not necessarily make people grow callous, and, and——"

Aunt Flora was to have heard a few more home truths, but I was not equal to continuing my argument, and broke into a wild fit of weeping, which seemed to astonish Mrs. Sherwood considerably. For a while she made no comment. Then, noting that I had quieted down, she said, in a loud, sharp voice:

"Your present conduct, Miss D'Alton, is the reverse of seemly. When I tell your father that you have fallen in love with the very first single man whom we introduced to you, he will be extremely disappointed, for he thinks you are wiser, instead of more foolish, than the average run of impressionable girls."

"How dare you say that I was in love with Mr. Graysworthy?"

"I say it because nothing is more obvious. Yesterday, although you had only met the man once, you were ill-natured and unsociable to everybody else until you thought it was time for him to arrive. Then you brightened up for his sake, and when he failed to put in an appearance, you were so rude to Mynheer and Vrow Althaus that I was thankful to get you away from the place. And this morning, because I don't burst into tears and bemoan loudly the death of a man in whom I have no interest, you pile such insults upon me that I

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would never forgive you if I did not fully understand the reason for your vagaries of temper."

To this speech I made no response, not because I was sulky, but because I was not sure that Mrs. Sherwood was in the wrong. And when she made a dignified exit from the room, I remained in a very uncertain frame of mind for some time.

Could it be true that I had fallen in love with Mr. Graysworthy, and that that was why I wept bitterly on hearing of his death? Certainly I liked him, as anybody else would like him. But my love does not dwell so near the surface that I could fling it to the first comer, and I dismissed the idea as grossly unjust, especially after I recollected that our parlourmaid had been no more able to restrain her tears than I had been.

Concerning the indictment of rudeness on the previous day, I was willing to grant that *ennui* and disappointment might have made me less tolerant of the failings of our host and hostess than I might otherwise have been. But I felt quite sure that, under similar circumstances, I should again behave in similar fashion, and that, after all, there was a great deal that was strange about the Althaus couple.

About Mrs. Sherwood, too, for that matter. Else why should she have shown such fear lest I saw through the Vrow's dirty curtains and still dirtier windows? And what did the cry of the night-jar mean? Or the presence of the big, burly man who produced it? Still stranger, why should my maid have been talking to him? And how is it that she was not at home in time to perform her usual evening duties?

It also occurred to me that the unfortunate young Englishman had probably been attacked and killed while on his way to join us. And I wished with all my heart that we had not given him an invitation, as he would then have probably been saved from the death which awaited him.

But did it lie in wait for him? Was it not much more likely that the footpads who had killed him were simply lying in ambush for the first unwary traveller who might come their way? And was it not notorious that strangers of apparent wealth were often killed and thrown into the numerous canals of Rotterdam and Amsterdam?

I was so absorbed in thinking over all sorts of possibilities in connection with the tragedy of which I had just heard that I did not notice the presence of the parlour-maid, who was clearing the breakfast table until she observed timidly:

"Please excuse me, miss, for crying just now, but I really couldn't help it."

"Of course you couldn't," I returned sadly. "It's a very awful thing to have happened."

"They are saying downstairs, miss, that it must be the work of some enemy, or else the poor gentleman would have been robbed."

At these words a startling idea came to me, and I asked eagerly:

"Susan, are you sure he wasn't robbed?"

"The papers say not, because his things were all found on him—money and watch, too."

"Susan, let me see that paper. I want to satisfy myself about something."

Probably Susan thought simple curiosity was at the bottom of my wish to read the *Tageblatt*. But she obeyed me at once, and went to fetch the paper.

"Please, miss," she said a few minutes later, "Madame is very angry with me for mentioning the murder while you were there, and she says that if I give you a newspaper to read, she will dismiss me at once."

"And so I will!" joined in an irate voice from the doorway. "In fact, you may consider yourself dismissed now, this very instant."

It was Aunt Flora who spoke thus angrily, and it was easy to see that she was simply furious. Susan was dismayed beyond words.

"Oh, Madame," she implored. "Surely you do not mean it!"

"Indeed, I do! I will have nobody in my service who forgets her place like you have done this morning. There are plenty of well-trained waiting-maids to be obtained by anybody who pays good money."

"But, Madame, I am a stranger here now. My people have left Holland to go to America, and I have nobody belonging to me here."

"I cannot help that. You shall have a month's wages, and leave my service this very day."

The more I saw of Mrs. Sherwood, the less I liked her. But I was not intimidated by her, so said promptly:

"Susan, don't worry about that. If Madame Sherwood will not employ you, I will, and if you like, you shall go back to England with me."

Susan immediately expressed her gratitude, and hurried out of the room, with the wise intention of avoiding further unpleasantness. But Mrs. Sherwood looked daggers at me, and announced her intention of inducing "poor dear Beverley" to reconsider his promise to make me the mistress of his Park Lane mansion.

"You are no more fit to preside over a house than is a babe unborn!" was her scornful assertion. "You would have everything in a muddle directly, and your own father would find his authority disputed if you were allowed to take the servants in hand."

For all answer to this diatribe, I touched the bell, which Susan answered.

"Susan," I said quietly. "Go and order the carriage for me. I am going out."

Susan disappeared, and Aunt Flora seemed to suddenly realise that, although I was but a school girl, just emancipated from schoolroom discipline, I was quite beyond being ruled by her. For she dropped her antagonistic attitude, mustered a beaming smile, and exclaimed cheerily:

"That's right, dear! I'm so glad you've decided to go out. Where are we going to?"

For a second only did I debate whether to feign civility or not. Then I decided that no good could come of constant recrimination, and that, having evidently a most deceitful person to deal with, I might as well use a little moderation in showing my own real feelings.

So I answered her in kind, with the words:

"It's very good of you to think of going out with me. But I shall not need to keep you long, if you are pressed for time. I only want to read what the *Tageblatt* says about that poor man who has been killed."

"But you don't need to go out to see the paper!"

"There is nothing else for it, if you will not let me see your copy, and if the servants must not bring me one."

"My dear Vivienne, you are under a most strange misapprehension. I wouldn't presume to dictate what you should read or what you should not read.

"What I was angry about was your being told of this sad tragedy at all, as it was sure to be a shock to you. I had read the news myself, before ever you came down to breakfast, and had carefully put the paper out of your sight, for your father strictly enjoined me to keep all unpleasant things from you.

"Then Susan came and upset all my plans by blurting the news out at breakfast time, and, not content with that, she wanted her love of sensation to be pandered to by watching you read and cry over the painful details.

"No wonder I was angry! But, in the privacy of your own room, there is no earthly reason why you shouldn't read all the sensational news in Rotterdam, if you wish to."

I had won a victory, and I knew it. But I had sense enough to appear to take Mrs. Sherwood's elaborate explanation at its fictitious value, so said that I was sorry for misunderstanding her. The result was that I eventually perused the much disputed news sheet in my own room, and satisfied myself that that which I had half guessed at had indeed taken place.

As Mrs. Sherwood had truly said, the details of the case were painful reading to me. But to the outsider it would appear amply evident that personal revenge had been at the bottom of the tragedy. The victim had apparently been deprived of nothing, for was not his property, including his money, his pocket-book containing a few notes, and his watch and chain, all still to the fore? So how could robbery be suspected?

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But what about the belt of diamonds, worth fifty-thousand pounds? That was not included amongst the recovered items, and its disappearance left only one conclusion open.

Gilbert Grays worthy had been killed by somebody who knew of that belt of diamonds. He must have been lured to some pretended diamond merchant's house, and robbed of his life and his gems. Then, having carefully left everything else upon him, the murderers found a chance of depositing the body where it was found in the dark hours of the early morning, and I was thankful that nobody except Aunt Flora and myself heard him mention his wealth while he was in our house. Otherwise I might always have feared that the assassins got their fatal information through the indiscretion of one of our servants.

* * *

Aunt Flora really must have had my interests at heart, for she had been consideration itself ever since she and I fought out the question of supremacy, and she virtually insisted upon turning over all management of the household affairs to me.

I looked closely at the two. The man was certainly no whom I had seen before, and the woman looked very much like Annchen, my maid!

"It will be fine practice for you," she said smilingly. "Of course it doesn't matter if a lot of money is wasted over the experiment, but it will get you into the way of giving your orders authoritatively before we go to Park Lane. And you don't know how thankful I am to find you so sensible and grown up! I had pictured you as a perfect innocent, who couldn't say 'bo' to a goose, and who must be managed accordingly."

"And you are glad to find me different?"

"Can you doubt it? True, dear Beverley was going to give me a lot of money for training you into grown-up ways, and I find my occupation gone."

"Oh, well, you shall have the money, anyway, so don't worry about that."

It was evident that I certainly was grown-up. And my father ought to have been pleased, if he really wanted me to play the Lady Bountiful in a natural manner, for I had a happy knack of dispensing his wealth right royally. But, though it was Aunt Flora herself who was to be benefited this time, she did not seem to be at all delighted by my generosity. In fact, this was the only subject on which she and I were now in danger of being at variance, for she was as fond of safeguarding my father's interests as if they had been her own.

My maid, Annchen, had to be replaced for a time by Susan, for she had an attack of hysteria when she heard of the sad death of the poor gentleman who visited at our house, and I had not the heart to insist upon her performance of her duties. In fact, I would have liked to dispense with her altogether, for I preferred Susan. But Aunt Flora was so pleasant and obliging that I felt I ought to consult her wishes to a certain degree, and she seemed to think Annchen quite a treasure.

Remembering what I had seen from Vrow Althaus' window, I mentioned to Annchen that I had seen her talking to a man outside. But she was so hurt and astounded by the accusation, and furnished me with such a convincing *alibi*, that I was soon convinced that I had been misled by a chance resemblance, and that Annchen was not the girl I saw.

It is nice to have unlimited money to use, as I had already found out. We left Rotterdam by the Harwich boat and journeyed very comfortably. But, though the house was to be dismantled and given up, all the trouble I had was to allow myself to be dressed, step into a carriage, and be driven to the boat landing.

Aunt Flora kept her berth during the whole of the evening, and advised me to do the same. But I could do no such thing, for I was in vigorous health, and was voyaging back to my native country, which I had not seen since I was a little child. So I naturally spent as much time as possible on deck.

Susan attended Aunt Flora, and Annchen had an easy post in looking after me. There were very few saloon passengers on board. But the second-class cabins were fairly full, and, from the superior vantage post of the poop, I liked to look at whatever transpired on the lower deck.

"It is growing very cold, miss. Shall I fetch you another wrap before I go to my cabin again?"

It was Annchen who asked the question, and I replied in the negative, adding that I meant to go and lie down for a few hours, so that I might be fresh when my father met me at

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Harwich. Aunt Flora had already given Susan permission to go to bed, and Annchen informed me that if I did not require her services till within a couple of hours of landing, she would gladly go to bed, too.

I saw the girl close her cabin door behind her, after peeping into Mrs. Sherwood's stateroom, to see if the latter were really comfortable. Then I took my cloak off, and lay down on the lounge for a while. But, feeling absolutely wideawake and restless, I soon rose and wrapped myself up again. Then, creeping softly out of my cabin, and up the companion, I sat in the shadow of one of the poop ventilators, idly gazing, now upon the gliding waters, black as ink in the darkness of the night, and anon watching the few passengers who preferred the glories of the ocean to the seclusion of their berths, although it was long after twelve.

Suddenly, I looked with something more than passing interest upon two people who joined each other on the lower deck. One of them looked very like Annchen, only Annchen had no such cloak as this girl was wearing, and it clearly was a case of striking resemblance, as Annchen had said. The other was certainly the big, rough-looking man whom I had seen through Madame Althaus' window. He struck a match to light his cigarette, and left not a doubt in my mind that it was the same man. But his cigarette was left unlighted, for the girl snatched the burning match out of his hand, and flung it on to the deck.

I could not hear what she said, but fancied that she might be reproaching him for being indiscreet enough to show himself like that. And I could not help lingering there, watching the couple who seemed to converse in whispers. For they held a strange fascination for me, although their presence was as ominous of darkness as is the cry of the bird the man imitated on that fatal night at Rotterdam.

"They are birds of evil!" I told myself. "They are birds of evil! I wish they had not been journeying on the same ship with us!"

"Miss D'Alton, pray forgive me if I seem intrusive. But you have dropped your cloak, and will get your death of cold, if you don't be careful!"

These words were uttered by Viscount Broomville, a fellow-passenger whom Aunt Flora introduced to me during dinner, and they brought me back from foolish pessimism to a pleasanter frame of mind. Still, although I turned to the Viscount with a grateful smile for his thoughtfulness, I felt myself bound to take him partially into my confidence.

"You see that couple sitting near the hatch?" I inquired, almost in a whisper, receiving for answer:

"Yes, they are evidently enjoying themselves."

"Would you recognise the man again?"

"Yes. He is a perfect specimen of a rascal. But the woman is too closely wrapped up to be easily identified. Have they any special interest for you?"

"I saw them both, under ominous circumstances, a week ago, and something tells me that mischief attends them wherever they go."

The Viscount presumably was too well-bred to pooh-pooh my superstitious remark. But he must have thought me very foolish, for how could he possibly enter into my feelings over the matter. Still, this did not prevent him saying softly:

"If you will allow me to escort you down below, Miss D'Alton, I will walk on to the lower deck, and have a closer look at the couple. I shall then be certain to know them when next I see them."

Without a word, I turned, and, doing my best to avoid attracting attention, I hurried down the companion ladder, and waited near the saloon till the Viscount joined me again.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "But the birds must have scented my coming, for they have both disappeared. It's a pity I didn't get a better look at the woman."

"Oh, it doesn't really matter," was my somewhat shame-faced rejoinder. "I was really very silly to trouble you over the matter. But I thank you all the same."

"Oh, please don't thank me for having done nothing," was the smiling rejoinder. Then my new friend bowed and left me, and I passed quietly into our state-room, and was soon fast asleep.

I hardly seemed to have rested an hour when Annchen, bright, fresh, and smiling, brought me a cup of tea, and told me that we should be in Harwich in an hour. This was joyful news, and I lost no time in getting ready to join the eager throng of passengers who were preparing to land as soon as possible.

Aunt Flora did not come on deck until the boat touched the landing stage, and I think she was rather surprised to see me talking animatedly with Viscount Broomville, who, besides being a "genuine aristocrat," as she afterwards put it, was an extremely handsome man.

"How do you do, Mrs. Sherwood?" he asked cordially. "I have just been telling your niece that I already know her father, and that he is responsible for the good stroke of business I have done in Rotterdam. In fact, I hope you will both welcome me when I call to see him to-morrow."

I was delighted to know that I should soon see him again. But I would have given my right hand rather than let him come, if I had known what the awful results of to-morrow's visit were to be.

(Another long instalment of this exciting series next week).

I am very glad to say that the interest in our Unsolved Love Problems is being well sustained; in fact, it goes farther than this, for the number of entries grows larger every time. All of you will be glad, therefore, to see that another one appears in this number, on pages 73 and 74. It is entitled "The Engagement of Edith Sargeant," and, in my opinion, the story forms one of the most interesting problems that have yet appeared, and I am anticipating that many of the readers who have not yet attempted to show their argumentative powers will make a start in endeavouring to explain what is the correct thing for Edith Sargeant to do. There is no doubt whatever that the position in which she finds herself is a truly embarrassing one to a strictly honourable girl. It is by no means always an easy matter to choose between love and duty, and the circumstances of every case have to be based solely upon their own merits. Now, readers, what do you think she ought to do? Would it be right for her to marry the bishop when she loves Maurice Clinton?

I will award a prize of one guinea to the reader who sends in what I consider to be the best reasons for the course he advocates Edith Sargeant to take. Replies must not exceed one hundred words, and should be written on one side of the paper only. The last day on which I can receive replies will be Friday, January 22nd. None arriving after this date will be considered. Address your envelopes to The Editor, *Short Stories*, Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C. Mark the top left hand corner "Seventh Love Problem."

* * * * *

In my next chat I will announce the winner in the Unsolved Love Problem that appeared in our Christmas number, entitled "The Duty of Roger Forbes."

Your Editor.

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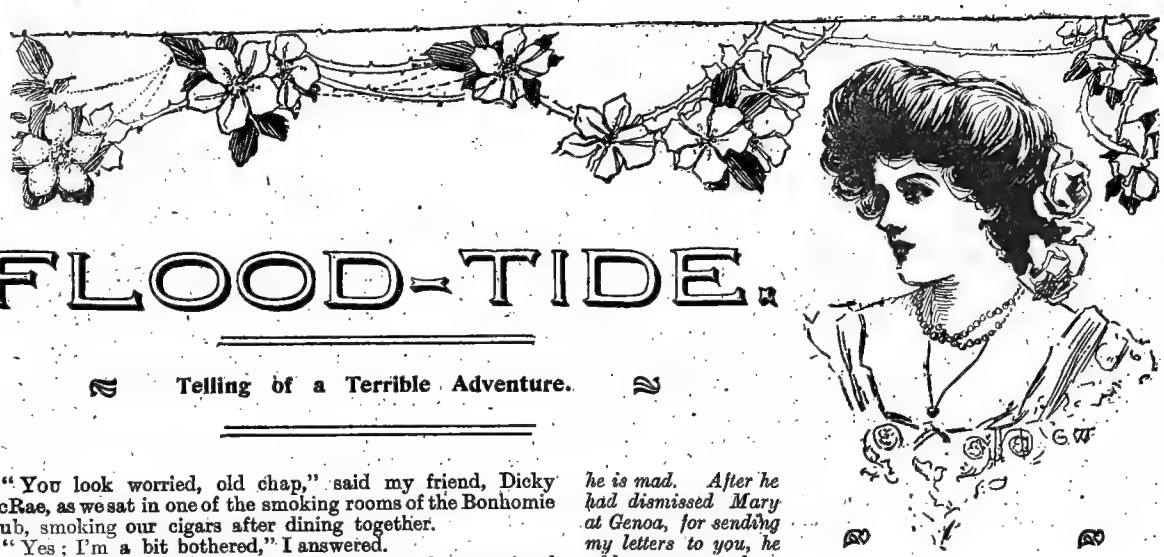

FLOOD-TIDE.

Telling of a Terrible Adventure.

"You look worried, old chap," said my friend, Dicky McRae, as we sat in one of the smoking rooms of the Bonhomie Club, smoking our cigars after dining together.

"Yes; I'm a bit bothered," I answered.

"Mammon or Cupid, Travers, if one may be permitted to inquire?" asked Dicky. "So far as my personal observation goes those are the only sources of trouble when a man is concerned."

I smiled in spite of myself, as I answered:

"Well, you've got it in once. Both the gods are mixed up in this. Shall I bore you horribly if I make a confidant of you?"

"Can't possibly say until you've got on a bit," rejoined my candid friend. "Fire away."

"Well, you know there is an understanding between Mabel—that is, Miss Dalrymple—and myself, although her uncle, who is also her guardian, is distinctly averse to the match?"

"I seem to have a dim recollection of listening to a half hour's rhapsody dealing with her charms and virtues as viewed through your eyes, old chap. Period, as they say on play bills, a year ago. The scene, if I mistake not, this very room. The course of true love was not running smooth. Uncle and guardian thought you were after her 'tin,' which, to do you justice, I'm quite sure you were not."

"I was, and am now most anxious that every penny of it be settled upon herself," I interjected.

"Good man," observed Dicky. "Well, I believe the lady will be twenty-one in nine months' time. Stern uncle's guardianship ceases to exist. Lovers marry and live happy ever after, eh?"

"That is what we reckon on," I said dolefully. "But complications have arisen. Mr. Dalrymple requested me to cease seeing Mabel, and intimated none too gently that the doors of his house I were closed against me. I told him plainly that I should still endeavour to meet his niece. His answer to that was to drag her off to the Continent, forbidding her to communicate their whereabouts to me. Indeed, he intercepted two letters she sent me, and returned them to her with his compliments. For a time we managed to correspond through her maid, but she got found out and got 'the sack,' poor beggar. I'm allowing her a pound a week to keep her going until she gets another berth. When she left, Mabel and her uncle were at Genoa, that was six weeks ago. I tried to get a month's leave so as to try and track them down, but several of our fellows are on the 'sick list' and the Colonel refused it. Since then I have heard nothing from her until this morning, when I got this."

I passed the letter across to him.

"*River House,*
"*Bank Side,*
"*Wapping.*

"My Dear Jack (he read out)—*I cannot imagine what has come over my uncle. The most charitable assumption is that he is mad. After he had dismissed Mary at Genoa, for sending my letters to you, he told me to get ready at once to travel. Since then we have been to, goodness knows how many places, remaining only a few days in each, but gradually getting nearer England. Three days ago he told me we were going back to London, and I rejoiced, thinking that at last I should be able to find some means to see you. Imagine my dismay when instead of our going to the old house in Mount Street, he brought me to this strange place where I am virtually kept a prisoner.*

"*I am afraid he means to do me some bodily harm. His manner is awfully strange. He turns a deaf ear to all my appeals to be allowed to go free, and when I threatened him with your vengeance yesterday, he flew into a mad paroxysm of rage.*

"*He has, however, in a calmer moment so far yielded to my intreaties as to allow me to have an interview with you here to-night at ten o'clock in his presence. Oh, come, dear love! I am not only pining for you but am in actual fear of my life.*

"*With all my love,*
"*Always yours,*
"Mabel."

McRae gave a low whistle of astonishment as he passed the letter back to me and ejaculated:

"And this is the twentieth century! Of course you are going."

"Certainly, but I am not sure that I ought not to take some precautionary measures. Under ordinary circumstances the obvious thing to do would be to appeal to the police, but I hesitate to drag my poor girl's name into a scandal. She would no doubt have taken some step of that sort herself had it not been for this consideration."

"No," said Dicky. "I can see the difficulty. But still something ought to be done. The place, judging from the address, is some out-of-the-way hole, where you might be knocked on the head and nobody be the wiser."

"At any rate, you will know where I have gone," I remarked. "Suppose I drop you a line to-morrow if things are all right. Should you not hear from me by—say, eleven, communicate with the authorities. Of course, it is just possible that Mabel in her fear may have unconsciously exaggerated the affair."

Dicky puffed away at his cigar meditatively.

"Yes, that is all right," he ejaculated at last, "but I don't like your going there alone. The whole thing looks 'fishy' to me. If I may, I'll come along with you, first sending a note to my brother telling him the address we are going to, and asking him to take steps if I don't arrive back by morning."

"My dear old chap," I objected, "I am awfully obliged to you, and should be only too pleased to have your company, but it's a beastly shame to drag you into this. There may be grave dangor."

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"A delightful change from the monotony of life," he responded lightly. "Glad to be of some help to 'Love's young dream.' So I'm coming."

I tried to dissuade him from the venture, but he had made up his mind to stick by me, and finally I gave in.

By the time my friend had written the letter to his brother the moment had arrived to start.

The hall porter got us a hansom, and we were soon bowling along at a good pace towards our very mysterious destination.

On the way down we talked of nothing but the strange adventure upon which we were embarking. During the conversation Dicky remarked:

"By the way, haven't I heard somewhere that Dalrymple was once confined in an asylum?"

"Yes, when he was a much younger man," I rejoined. "But he was only there a few months, and was discharged as cured. Been very steady ever since, and people have mostly forgotten it. My own theory is that he has lost his mental balance again; that is about the only explanation which will fit in with his conduct."

"How awful for Miss Dalrymple," Dicky responded, "but buck up, old chap, we'll soon have her away from him."

Bank Side, Wapping, turned out to be a wretched street abutting on the river in one of the lowest parts of the locality. We dismissed our cab at the top of it, and walked down, keeping a sharp look-out for River House. After some trouble we found it at the end of the lane—a ramshackle place standing by itself with one of its walls lapped by the river.

"Cheerful-looking hole," I remarked as I knocked at the door.

It was opened quickly as though I had been expected, and Dalrymple appeared, holding a candle.

He started back as he saw I was not alone.

"As the place which you have chosen as a residence for your niece is in a distinctly dangerous locality, I have thought it wiser to bring my friend Mr. McRae with me," I observed sternly in answer to his look of surprise.

He muttered something about it not mattering, and motioned us in. I noticed that his looks were wild and distraught, and glanced meaningly at my friend.

As soon as he had shut the door, he bade us follow him, and we started across the hall towards the stairs at the farthest end, he being some little distance ahead.

He had reached the stairs, when suddenly he stooped down and lifted a lever, and before we could grasp his intention, the flooring seemed to sink beneath our feet and we were precipitated into a vault below, the floor of which was covered by about two feet of water; the boards which had given way returning to their original position when relieved of our weight. McRae being just ahead of me was the first to fall, and his body served somewhat as a shield for mine. It took a few minutes for us to recover, but having found we had not received serious hurt, beyond a few bruises and slight cuts, we started to examine our prison chamber.

It was about seven feet high and not very broad, as we found by linking hands and stretching across. Then we commenced to hammer upon the roof, calling out at the top of our voices, but received no response. Remember that all this time we were in pitch blackness for there was no window to the place.

Judge of our amazement when suddenly three thin rays of moonlight broke across the darkness and we saw each other's faces. It did not take us long to reach the spot whence the light proceeded. It was an aperture let into the wall which adjoined the river, and it was an inch or so from the top of our prison chamber. Evidently some sliding panel, worked from the exterior, had been removed, but the space thus exposed was too small to squeeze our bodies through and in any case the iron bars let into the brickwork would have prevented our exit. Dicky was the first to grip the reason of this change in our prison chamber.

"Your hand is smaller than mine; stretch it through the bars and see what is beneath them," he said.

Without seeing his reason I followed his suggestion, but drew it back quickly for it had touched water and the sudden contact was chilly.

As we crouched there, our faces were close together, and I saw a look of fear creep over his as I let the water drip from my fingers.

"Can you see the object of our jailor?" ejaculated my friend. "If I am not mistaken the tide is rising, and if that opening is below the level to which it reaches, this vault will be filled and we shall be drowned. That letter he allowed Miss Dalrymple to write was merely a trap to get you here."

Even as he spoke the river was slightly ruffled by a passing breeze and a few drops of water came full tilt at our faces.

"But we can swim," I said.

"Of what use to swim if the water reaches to the roof of this horrible vault," he asked.

"That we must see," I returned, and by jumping up, managed to run my hands over the roof. Alas! his fears were but too well founded. For the moisture still clung to it from the tide which had gone before. There was no doubt about it, we were trapped. The groan which involuntarily sprang from my lips told its own tale to my companion in misfortune.

"It is as I feared," he muttered, "and I can see no way out of it."

I need feel no shame in admitting that we were both panic-stricken. In an ordinary way neither of us would have shuddered at death. We had faced the grim old terror many a time, in the Soudan, and South Africa. But this was such a hopeless death. If only we could have died fighting, or even been given the chance to strike one blow in self-defence we should have been satisfied.

It was the thought of having to stand there whilst the remorseless water rose higher and higher, knowing that, struggle as we might, it must eventually touch the roof above our heads and creep with insidious force through our nostrils, until it soaked the life from our bodies.

It was only for a few minutes though, and then Dicky ejaculated hopefully:

"There is yet hope that we can attract the notice of some passing boat."

His cheerfulness went far to banish my terror, and I joined with him in sending a lusty hail across the water.

The sound travelled forth and returned to us in echoes, but there being no ships anchored near and the hour being far into the night, it was unlikely that any boats would be upon the river, and no answer came to us. Once I thought I caught the splashing of oars, but it was my fancy. After a while my companion realised the hopelessness of our cries.

"Let us save our breath for something which is likely to be of more help," he said. "You are of lighter build than myself, clamber up on my shoulder and see if you can move that trap."

I followed him to the centre of our prison chamber and did his bidding, but the heavy oaken beams were as hard as iron, and would not give a jot for all my pushing. Besides, from my position it was impossible to put forth full strength.

"See if you cannot find the join, and prise it apart with your fingers," ejaculated Dicky.

But the trap had been contrived so cunningly that I could not find a chink, although I searched closely with my penknife.

I dropped to the ground and we stood facing each other, trying to think of some fresh means of escape. I moved to the

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grating once more, and found, as I feared, that the water was nearing the opening. It was, in fact, nearly up to the opening, and the wind was rising, and blowing dead in our faces, so that every now and then a tiny cascade was blown towards us.

"Just one more shout," I said, "And then we must somehow close this opening."

"Best save our breath with this wind blowing against us, our voices will not carry an inch," answered my companion.

Nevertheless, I thought it unwise to neglect anything which might possibly help us, so I once more yelled at the top of my voice.

It was of no avail. The sound was beaten back in my teeth as though even the elements had conspired against us.

"Quick, your coat," shouted Dicky. "Perhaps we may caulk this opening. Another moment and the water will be upon us, and it will be too late."

I grasped his meaning, and tore the coat from my shoulders. Working together we pressed its ample folds between the bars, so that it formed somewhat of a barrier to the water, whilst kept in that position by our hands. We soon knew from the dampness that the water had stretched itself above and beyond the aperture, which knowledge gave us some hope as only a few drops filtered through.

"It will make us none the less secure if we give up more 'togs' to the service," I told Dicky. "Take off what you can spare, old chap, whilst I press my back against the bars to rest my hands a bit."

When he had added his coat and waistcoat to mine, I began to think we should cheat Dalrymple after all; but to make assurance doubly sure, I added all I had on except my trousers.

In spite of our predicament, Dicky's light-heartedness found vent in whistling one of Huntley Wright's songs from "The Country Girl." I was about to attempt to imitate his *sang froid*, when my attention was attracted by a slight whirring in the wall; and this time it was beyond our reach, even if we had the clothes left with which to stop it up. Once again the moonlight beams came into the vault, and we could catch a glimpse of each other's faces.

"What now?" I queried. "This looks a bit hopeless."

He was silent and I knew he was puzzling his brain for some contrivance to meet this fresh danger. I did not speak again for a few minutes, so that he might have a chance to get his thinking tackle to work; whilst at the same time I also racked my own. At last I could bear the silence no longer. It was some consolation to hear even one's own voice.

"Is it a case?" I asked.

He did not answer but I saw from the drooping of his head that he thought it was.

It was now my turn to act the part of consoler. Extending my hand, which he clasped in his own with a hearty grip, I said: "Cheer up, old chap! At least we have made a good fight for it. And now there is nothing left but to die as gamely as we can. I'm sorry I dragged you into this, Dicky——"

"That's all right, my boy," he answered. "Suppose the end had got to come some time. One might as well meet it trying to help a 'pal' as in any other manner."

We were slowly being drowned.

By this time the water began to come in from the second opening; at first in a trickling stream, and then in a regular cascade as the tide rose higher.

"Time we took to swimming," whispered my companion. "We may as well keep the 'ball rolling' as long as we can."

And thereafter we rose with the water.

It was awful. That unearthly silence in the semi-darkness! The river by now had covered three quarters of the upper grating, and the water in our chamber had crept up to the river's level. There was only an inch or two of space between our heads and the roof, and the water was rising higher and higher.

We watched the last rays of light slowly lifted upon the bosom of the river.

As though to mock our misery the moon had formed a silvery path leading right away to the farther shore. The houses stood out clear, with here and there twinkling lights illuminating their windows.

I thought of my past life. Of the many great deeds which as a boy I had resolved to accomplish, and of the very little it had been given me to attain in manhood.

Then we were plunged in darkness.

The river had risen above the grating and blotted out all hope even as it quenched all light!

There was not sufficient room to swim now, and we had to tread water to keep our heads clear.

Suddenly we thought we heard a scream above us, and as evidence that we were not mistaken, there was a heavy splash and a body was swept past us in the water outside.

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"I'm afraid Dalrymple is doing more murderous work and committing his victim to the river," said Dicky, grimly.

"Good God—Mabel, my poor darling!" I moaned.

Then came a trampling of feet above our heads, and the welcome sound of bolts being withdrawn.

"Keep quiet," whispered McRae. "I believe Dalrymple imagines that we are dead, and is going to gloat over his handiwork. Even if it is too late to save our lives, he shall share our fate!"

"I can at least avenge her," I muttered.

"Look out for the trap falling," came the warning from Dicky.

Down came the planks, striking the water with a sullen splash, and narrowly escaping my head.

A form bent over the opening and catching sight of our bobbing heads, would have given vent to a cry, but before it could leave the lips, I, being nearest, had made one desperate jump, and, catching the figure by the throat, dragged it into the water.

My rage would have caused me to choke the breath from the person, but suddenly it struck me that the flesh was too soft, and the throat too well covered, to be that of Dalrymple; whilst the limbs which coiled round mine in their agony were well moulded and supple. My fears as to some terrible mistake being thus aroused, I somewhat relaxed my grip, and fortunately it was so, for at that moment, Dicky McRae, who by now had clambered to the solid flooring above, shouted to me to stay my hand.

"You blithering cuckoo, it's a woman you have got hold of."

Then I glanced down and was filled with remorse, for it was my dear girl.

With his aid I managed to get her from the water, and we placed her upon a settee that was near and tried to revive her.

Slowly she recovered her faculties under our clumsy efforts and the sweet colour crept over her features as she realised who it was that was bending over her.

"My uncle," she gasped. "He has fallen into the river."

"A good place for him," muttered Dicky, *sotto voce*. But nevertheless he crossed to the window.

"I can see nothing of him, Miss Dalrymple," he announced. "But don't worry, no doubt he will reach the bank in safety."

"Tell me, dearest, what has happened?" I asked.

Then from her modestly-told story, we learnt that we owed her lives entirely to her.

The noise of our entry at the outer door had warned her of our arrival. Her uncle had promised to bring me up as soon as I arrived, but as he did not do so she had stolen downstairs to see what had become of me. By that time the trap-door had closed over us, and she could only see her uncle hovering about, but something in his stealthy movements warned her that he was up to mischief.

Silently she watched him manipulating some levers, without in the least knowing what it betokened. Then our cries penetrated dimly to her ears. Her uncle was dancing about, shouting with demoniacal joy, snapping his fingers; and was evidently raving mad.

In spite of her fright she had come lower down the stairs, and then saw that her uncle was leaning out of a window, which, on subsequent investigation, proved to be directly over the gratings. No doubt with the characteristic cunning of the homicidal maniac, he was ascertaining whether the water had entered the second aperture.

At that moment she had heard our cries once more, and realised that he was trying to murder somebody. She screamed to summon assistance. This no doubt startled the would-be murderer, and caused him to overbalance and fall in the river.

It was his body we had seen swept past the grating, and two days later it was washed up on the beach near the mouth of the river.

Martin H. Potter.

.. THE .. INDEPENDENCE OF KITTY.

And How She Lost It.

The many unfortunate circumstances which left Miss Kitty Sanderson and her young sister to face alone an appalling world need not be told here.

Her pecuniary assets (bar a few pounds) were nothing; but she possessed a radiant face, and was ungrumbling and fearless. And also she set great store on a suddenly discovered independence. Wherefore Miss Kitty held her head high in grim London town.

Bravely, with careful management, those few pounds held out. But an advertisement came to her notice and so she resolved to keep up her sister's music lessons still.

That morning, flushed and anxious, but confident, she answered several questions of a young-old, keen-faced agent for something or other. And in the afternoon (this was something like success) she was installed at a desk which had a typewriter fitted with a disappearing mounting. A simple desk to the unseeing eye. But you pressed, or pushed, or pulled, or something of that sort, and a shining typewriter bobbed into view.

For a consideration, payable weekly, Miss Kitty was to manipulate the disappearing typewriter. The room let in the sun splendidly, and it was summer; and she wore a cool, striped blouse, and enjoyed her work. Her little sister made a fresh start on the music lessons.

The agent for something or other did business on the second floor. On the same floor was another office, on the floor above more offices. On the third floor, higher up, to learn wisdom from the stars, was the office of a paper, *Love and Duty*. Mostly *Love and Duty* was Mr. Jack Pavitt, aged twenty-four.

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That gentleman, coming down from the heights one day, found a lady—who wore a neat striped blouse—in evident distress upon the stairs. The reason of her distress was that an office boy was blocking the stairs with two brooms and a dustpan, while he whistled in a manner calculated to irritate. In this office boy there was no chivalry.

Mr. Jack Pavitt, appealed to silently by the radiant face, said "Good afternoon," very pleasantly; cuffed the office-boy, and showed, standing and smiling like the hero of a melodrama, an unhindered way for the owner of the radiant face. But going home that evening, he blessed the office-boy, and that night he dreamt of a striped blouse. In case you have forgotten, I have said this already, let me remind you again that it was Summer. And even n London some birds were singing.

Very gradually—for she held tight her independence—he learnt of her situation. He resolved great schemes, most of them only to be rejected. On a Saturday afternoon (on that day the typewriter refused to bob up after two o'clock under any circumstances) Miss Sanderson, seated in the tiny sitting-room, heard a great commotion in the street. Her sister came in breathless.

"There's a man outside with a great big box. And he says it's for us. And he wants eightpence."

"It's not for us," Kitty told the carrier when she reached the pavement. "It can't possibly be for us."

And yet the address was quite plain.

"S'ouse me," said the gigantic carter. "This is the right street, or else I'm—or else I'm a bloomin' Dutchman!"

And he did not look at all like a Dutchman.

"The address is right enough," said Kitty. "You'd better take it back to your yard, or somewhere."

"This was our last job," said the driver of the van. "We knocks off at one—*supposed* to. The yard'll be shut. I wants my dinner, too!" finished he.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Miss Kitty, moved by the appeal. "Of course you want your dinner. I'll take the wretched thing."

Miss Kitty Sanderson gave him a shilling (remnant of the pounds), and told him not to mind. So he carted the huge box up to the sitting-room; and there, when he had gone, she opened it, and it was full to the edge of very pleasant things to eat.

Miss Kitty's independence choked in her throat. After all, as Grace said: "Well, you can't pitch them out into the road, Kitty, can you?"

Later, Grace found in the box a half-sheet of notepaper, with these words on it, "From Uncle Jim."

Kitty was dubious. But Grace said: "Mother did use to talk about a brother of hers who went away. Perhaps it's him," she said, ungrammatical in her excitement.

"Then why doesn't he come and see us?" argued Kitty, independent still.

On the next Monday Mr. Jack Pavitt was very pleased with himself. More than once he trembled on the verge of disclosure and disgrace. But he managed to hold the secret.

It was in that very week (the gods, as advertised, giving to Mr. Pavitt with both hands) that Miss Sanderson confided an ambition to him—to make money in her spare time. And she, personally, thought that writing stories was a very nice and easy way of making money.

To himself Mr. Jack Pavitt said: "Well, this *is* luck."

"I hate you for everything you have done! I loathe a coward!"

Aloud he said: "Well, Kitty," (they had got to that, you know), "there's our rag, of course."

"What's it called?" asked Kitty innocently.

"Come now!" Jack was a little hurt. "*Love and Duty*!—I've told you heaps of times."

"Yes, I remember," said Kitty.

"I'd try it if I were you," said he.

"I think I shall," she decided. "They'll be fearful rot, my stories! You don't have the things to read, do you?"

"Oh, no," replied Mr. Jack Pavitt, lying wholesale for the cause.

It should be explained that Mr. Jack Pavitt had a tolerable private income, with which he would be a philanthropist.

So now, in the evenings, and on Saturday afternoons, Miss Sanderson was very busy. From *Love and Duty* came a nice little note, thanking her, inclosing a moderate cheque, and asking for more.

Kitty was vastly pleased. And you must picture the audacious Jack (i.e. *Love and Duty*) in his chair, signing her cheques with his pen name. He had to decide reluctantly that her stories were not good enough to print. He paid for them out of his private income.

At this, Kitty, full of her independence, wondered very much. More cheques came, but she was not at all satisfied. She wrote to inquire when her stories would be used. Mr. Jack Pavitt, seeing the coming storm, sat tight, and did not reply. When he met her and she asked about her stories, he said he had heard nothing about them from the editor. They were bound to be printed soon. But still Miss Kitty Sanderson was not at all satisfied.

Then she made up her mind. The scene changes to the offices (third floor) of *Love and Duty*. Mr. Jack Pavitt sat at a desk by the window. His paid but unprinted contributor faced him from the chair.

"Good morning, Jack," said she. "I want to see the editor about those stories of mine."

For a moment he weighed in his mind further prevarication or otherwise. Then he decided. He caught his breath, and said:

"He's here! What is it?"

"What do you mean, Jack?"

Certainly Miss Sanderson was full of a great wrath.

"And the stories? No good at all?"

"Oh, I'll alter 'em a bit," said Jack lamely.

She would not be appeased. All the huge independence of Miss Kitty Sanderson swept back upon her. She said:

"I hate you! I hate you for everything you have done. And—I loathe a coward!"

She finished close to tears. In the silence that followed his manhood came to the help of Mr. Jack Pavitt.

Kitty turned upon him, and cried: "*Why don't you go?*"

"I will not go," he replied, "because you love me."

Outside the office of *Love and Duty* it was Summer still. Inside it was Spring.

But it was a long time before he dared to confess his identity with Uncle Jim.

Herbert Shaw.

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Parts of Speech.

"A KISS, I'm told," said pretty Susie Brown, "is both a common and a proper noun." "That's true," her lover said, "but you will find it is a noun not easily declined."

With an Eye to Business.

TOM: "Why were you so determined to kiss that cousin of yours? You can't call her pretty." Dick: "I wanted to establish a precedent. She has two very pretty sisters, you know."

It Seemed So.

MISS THIN: "Don't you think my new dress is just exquisite? They all say so." Her Friend: "Oh, lovely! I think that dressmaker of yours could make a clothes-prop look graceful."

The Conclusion was Obvious.

MISS A.: "Why do you say that Miss Van Million, who is to be married to-day, is so plain? Do you know her by sight?" Miss B.: "No; but I notice that the papers have only printed the picture of her future husband."

She Put Her Foot Down.

MRS. DE FASHION: "My dear, I have picked out a husband for you." Miss De Fashion: "Very well; but I want to say now, mother, that when it comes to buying the wedding dress, I am going to select the materials myself—so there!"

He Kept a Stricter Account.

"GEORGE," she said, as she looked up from her paper, "you were always telling me before marriage how much you loved me." "Yes." "And now you never mention it." "No." "Is it because—because——" "It's because I put it down in the cash-book now instead of telling you."

A Very Good Guess.

"AH, dearest," sighed a young man, kneeling at the feet of his ownest own, "do you know what, of all things, is nearest m heart?" "Really I cannot say," she sweetly replied, "but in this cold weather I should think it was a flannel vest." She was too practical, and it broke the engagement.

A Cure for Superstition.

MILDRED (very superstitious): "Oh, dear, I would never have accepted you, Jack, if I had remembered it was Friday evening!" Jack: "There's only one way to avert the evil omen, darling. We must very carefully kiss each other seven times at least every seven minutes during the first seventy minutes of our engagement."

A Ruse that Succeeded.

"PAPA," said the young mother, "I've decided on a name for baby; we will call her Imogen." Papa was lost in thought for a few minutes; he did not like the name, but if he opposed it, his wife would have her own way. "That's nice," said he presently. "My first sweetheart was named Imogen, and she will take it as a compliment." "We will call her Mary, after my mother," was the stern reply.

An Ambiguous Remark.

BASIL: "When we are married, my love, we shall have a lot to struggle with." Ella (consolingly): "We shall have each other!"

Another Version.

HE: "He that courts and runs away will live to court another day." She: "But he that courts and does not wed may find himself in court instead."

Who Could it Have Been?

MRS. SWEETSER: "George, you forgot to kiss me this morning when you went away." Mr. Sweetser: "Are you sure of it? I certainly remember kissing somebody this morning. I supposed it was you."

Such Flattery is Wicked.

"Is it a sin," asked a fashionable lady of her spiritual director, "for me to feel pleasure when a gentleman says I am handsome?" "It is, my daughter," he replied gravely; "we should never delight in falsehood."

He Immediately Repaired the Mistake.

"SIR!" exclaimed the fair maid indignantly, as Wittiman kissed her hand, "this is entirely out of place." "I thought so myself," returned the young man apologetically, "but I really hadn't the nerve to attempt the first one on your lips."

This Mercenary Age.

CLARA: "I am going to give you back our engagement ring. I can never marry you. I love another." Clarence: "Give me his name and address." Clara: "Do you want to kill him?" Clarence: "No; I want to try to sell him the ring."

He was Showing Good Tact.

"MAMMA," said the sweet young girl, "I think Mr. Meadows loves me and is beginning to have serious intentions." "What," the fond mother asked, "has brought you to this opinion?" "He laughed heartily at one of papa's jokes last night."

They are All the Same.

PHYLLIS: "Harry is the most conceited man I ever met." Maud: "What makes you think so?" Phyllis: "Why, he first asserts that I am the most adorable woman in the world, the most beautiful and intellectual, in every respect a paragon, and then he wants me to marry him."

She Rejected his Late Application.

"GEORGE, dear," she said with a blush, "do you know that Mr. Sampson asked me last night to be his wife?" "Well, I like his impudence. The idea of proposing to an engaged young lady. What did you say to him?" "I told him that I was very sorry indeed, but he was too late."

The Lesser of Two Evils.

MABEL: "Dicky, darling, mother wants to see me particularly, but it's so expensive travelling all that way. Don't you think she'd better come to us for a bit?" Dick: "Nonsense, dear; you've never found me stingy about that kind of thing. I'll give you the money for your journey after breakfast."

The Horse Mistook the Sound.

NELLIE (sympathetically): "You poor dear! What a narrow escape! And what startled the horse?" Maudie (indignantly): "Well, you know, Will was just helping me out of the dogcart, and—the stupid horse could not tell the difference between a 'Good-night' kiss and a signal to start. And he started. Some horses have so little sense."

His One Advantage.

"IT seems to me rather presumptdous for a youth in your position to ask for my daughter's hand," said the girl's father. "Can you give me any good reason why I should give my consent?" "Yes, sir," replied the young man promptly. "What?" "I am comparatively modest and economical in the matter of my personal expenditure, and I think you will find me less costly to maintain than any other son-in-law you could pick out!"

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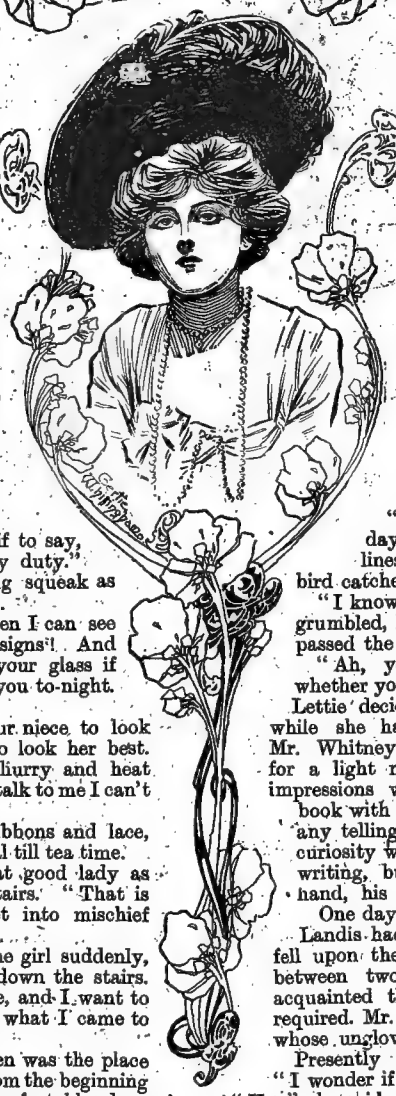
ODDS MADE EVEN.



The Tale of - - - - Two Mistakes.

"LETTIE, flirting is odious!"

Miss Elarson turned from her mirror, and looked at her aunt with wide-open eyes, round the corners of which lurked an expression of amusement.

"I quite agree with you, auntie," she said; "that is why I never flirt. I detest a flirt. And I never could see the fun in leading men captive in spite of themselves. There are always plenty of them ready to go into captivity without being led."

Mrs. Landis settled back in her chair with an air of hopeless expostulation, as if to say, "It will do no good, but I must do my duty." Her chair gave forth a timid, deprecating squeak as she rocked gently backwards and forwards.

"My dear! To say you never flirt, when I can see by the look of your eye that you have designs! And you would never spend two hours before your glass if you did not expect Mr. Whitney to admire you to-night. Confess, now, would you?"

"Why, Aunt Kate, you don't want your niece to look like a fright, do you? It is one's duty to look her best. And if I must dress, I am not going to hurry and heat myself. As for Mr. Whitney, if he likes to talk to me I can't prevent it. One must be civil."

The young lady leisurely adjusted her ribbons and lace, and announced herself at her aunt's disposal till tea time.

"Well, enjoy yourself, Lettie," said that good lady as she rose to accompany her niece downstairs. "That is what we came here for. Only don't get into mischief while you are under my care."

"I'll tell you a secret, Auntie," said the girl suddenly, facing her aunt when they were half way down the stairs. "My next story is to be one of the seaside, and I want to learn all I can about seaside life. That is what I came to Freshhaven for."

Certainly the lodging-house at Freshhaven was the place for experience of seaside life. It was filled from the beginning to the end of the season with a most comfortable class of boarders; schoolboys there for a fortnight's frolic, business and professional men with their families, some whose business no one knew, but all of whom were good-natured and eager to make the most of their holidays.

Mr. Roger Whitney, of whom Mrs. Landis and her niece had spoken, was a London artist, down for a few weeks of rest and change. He had from the first manifested some interest in Miss Elarson. What man fails to appreciate the fact that there is always a pretty face opposite him at table, that his position is the envy of half the men in the house, and that the young lady in question smiles upon him quite as frequently as upon the envious ones who would oust him if they could.

It came about naturally, as such things do, that Mr. Whitney was the escort of Mrs. Landis and her pretty niece on all occasions. If they wished to spend the morning on the beach, he carried camp-stool and cushions; if they carried their work to the lawn, he read or talked to them; he took them for drives, and generally made himself pleasant. As the days went by, he even allowed himself to be persuaded into giving Miss Elarson a sunrise row upon the water. But his temper was hardly proof against this unwonted early rising.

"It is downright tyranny getting a fellow up at such an unearthly hour," he said, as he helped her into the boat and shoved it off.

"It is the pleasantest time in the whole day," she said, as she adjusted the rudder lines in her hands. "You know 'the early bird catches the worm.'"

"I know it is the early worm that gets caught," he grumbled, looking over his shoulder to see that they passed the pier safely.

"Ah, yes," she said slyly; "it depends on whether you consider yourself the bird or the worm."

Lettie decided to begin the writing of her story while she had scenery and people at first hand. Mr. Whitney was developing into an ideal character for a light novel, and it was easier to write while impressions were fresh. She often took her note book with her on their little excursions, to transcribe any telling bit that came to her. Mr. Whitney's curiosity was sometimes aroused as he watched her writing, but as her notes were written in short-hand, his repeated inquiries were not rewarded.

One day, returning from a row, from which Mrs. Landis had been detained by a headache, a silence fell upon the two, such a silence as sometimes comes between two people who feel themselves so well acquainted that constant effort to entertain is not required. Mr. Whitney rowed slowly, watching Lettie, whose ungloved hand dabbled idly in the water.

Presently he said in a tentative kind of way: "I wonder if you were ever in love?"

"Yes," she said, rising to the situation, "lots of times. Weren't you ever?"

"I don't know. I've thought so once or twice, but I doubt if it was the real thing. How do you tell the genuine article?"

"Well, you know, Mr. Whitney," she replied, rescuing the boat from threatened collision with another by a quick turn of the rudder, "I never bother myself about that. It is so uncomfortable to be always analysing and weighing and measuring."

"I suppose so. But did you ever find the real thing?" he insisted.

She blushed. She was thinking of a certain love story not many months old, which was never going into any of her books.

"You are growing curious again," she said, flinging a handful of water on him as he sat facing her.

Lettie's story grew rapidly, and she found Mr. Whitney more than ever an inspiring subject for copy as his attentions grew more and more lover-like. Not that she encouraged

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him or drew him on; she simply let him "gang his ain gait," keeping him always away from subjects of purely personal import. She was not yet ready for that.

Several of the guests were sitting on the lawn one afternoon when Mr. Whitney strolled up and decoyed Miss Elarson off to a quiet, shady spot elsewhere. He seemed somewhat distrait, and all Lettie's attempts at conversation failed. At last she was silent.

"Miss Elarson," he said suddenly, "I want to tell you something."

His look and manner were unmistakable. It was coming unless she could put him off.

"Do you, Mr. Whitney?" she said cordially; "I have not heard anything amusing for an age."

"Has the Summer been so tame to you? To me it has been far from that. It has seemed like Heaven. Knowing you has changed my whole life, Miss Lettie."

"Do go on, Mr. Whitney," she said, smiling sweetly and provokingly on him. "Tell me the rest of it, and perhaps I can guess where you found it. I am sure I must have read it somewhere."

"Pshaw!" he answered, half angrily. "Why can't you give a fellow credit for being serious? I am in earnest, Miss Lettie."

She began to fear she should not be able to manage him.

"Of course you are in earnest, Mr. Whitney. I never knew a more earnest man. But it isn't good for you this kind of weather. It is insufferably hot here. Isn't it time for the bathers to be out? I promised Aunt Kate to go down to the beach with her."

But he was not to be put off long, and Lettie realised the fact. She wrote hard and long at her story, absenting herself from festivities in spite of the united protests of Mrs. Landis and Mr. Whitney. After several days' hard work she laid down her pen with a sigh of relief. Now she could let matters take their course.

She half wished he might have changed his mind, for she was not so hardened as to wish to break a man's heart for her own amusement. But if he would not be put off, if he would speak, why, her story was ready for the last love scene. That was a comfort.

An hour later she descended the stairs looking fresh and cool in the daintiest of pale blue dresses. Mr. Whitney was stretched full length on the grass near the verandah where her aunt was sitting.

"Where have you kept yourself for so long, Miss Elarson?" he asked, looking lazily at her from under his hat brim.

"I've been working," she replied. "Don't you pity me losing all the fun?"

"Pity you! I pity myself a great deal more. It has been an eternity."

"How old you must be by this time! Are there many grey hairs?" she asked teasingly.

"There were; but I tore them out in my despair. Are you going to work this afternoon?"

"Not if I can help it," she answered; "I think I have earned a holiday."

"Then come down to the beach with me," he said, sitting up and looking more animated, "I know a nice shady spot where we can get a breeze, and you can talk to me while I sketch."

"Very well; I am in an entertaining mood to-day. Wait till I get my hat."

Mr. Whitney did not seem inclined to stand by his programme for sketching. He drew fitfully for a few minutes, and then swung half round on his stool so as to face her.

"I am going to finish what I tried to say the other day when you left me so suddenly, Miss Elarson. I wanted to tell you that I love you."

He seemed rather nervous, making uneasy little scratches on a card that he had picked up. Lettie poked the end of her parasol in the sand and felt relieved that he stayed where he was. He was not going to be silly.

He went on calmly enough, yet with little nervous hitches between his words that showed the listening girl that he felt what he was saying.

"You have been such an inspiration to me this summer. Will you not continue to be that? Can't you learn to love me? Lettie, will you be my wife?"

Of course she could not, and would not. But he seemed so much in earnest that her conscience gave her some painful twinges as she told him so. She grew quite soft-hearted about it, and cried a little, thinking what a blow it must be to the poor man.

But to her unspeakable astonishment he seemed rather relieved than otherwise at her refusal. He tried manfully not to show it, but it was plain to be seen that he had feared she would accept him and was glad that she had not. She was puzzled, and inclined to be angry.

"Miss Elarson," he said, seeing her astonishment, "you have a right to be angry with me. I must make a confession, and then you will see that I do not deserve even your friendship. I painted a picture which I called 'The Wooing.' But the expression was not good; it was not real, and I could not make it so. Then I met you and found your face just what I had been longing for for my picture. I studied you for that. I really got to thinking a great deal of you, you know, so it was not all a pretence. But there is no excuse for me. There, you know it all!"

As he finished speaking he tossed the card into her lap. It was a cleverly accurate sketch of what her face must have been ten minutes before. The uneasy dashes were not from nervousness after all. She looked at the man. His head was in his hands, and his eyes bent on the ground, a most abject picture of humiliation. She looked at the card again, and thought how completely she had been duped. She need not pity him, at all events. Then the ludicrousness of it all struck her, and she burst into a hearty laugh. It was Mr. Whitney's turn to wonder. He looked up.

"I don't see anything funny in it," he said gloomily.

"You have confessed very frankly, Mr. Whitney. I shall have to confess now, though I did not intend to. You do not owe me anything for this."

"What can you mean?"

"I mean that I write stories and copy my heroes and their pretty sayings from life when I can. I have found you a very obliging model."

"You mean," he said, with rising anger, "that you deliberately led me on to make love to you so the public might have the benefit of it?"

"I didn't lead you on, and you know it, Mr. Whitney. I simply let you. You wanted me for your picture."

"True," he said, a smile taking the place of the show of temper in his eyes.

"I think we're even," Lettie said, holding out the card. "Use your sketch. I am sure I am very grateful for the help you have given me."

"And you really do not mind my using this?" he asked.

"Not in the least," she answered, smiling.

Then followed half an hour's animated discussion of the story and picture before they went back to the house.

Mrs. Landis was still on the lawn when her niece and Mr. Whitney returned. The glance that passed between the two young people as they separated at the steps told that astute lady that they knew something which the world did not. She followed Lettie to her room.

"My dear," she said, kissing her, "you need not tell me a word. I have eyes, and I have seen it all along. I see by your face that it is all settled."

"Yes, Aunt Kate," said Lettie, looking down demurely and trying not to laugh, "it is all settled."

Agnes Wiltberger.

Wife (sweetly): "What's the matter, dear? Did I forget to mend your shirt?" Husband: "Madam, this is too much! The woman who neglects her husband's shirt front is no longer the wife of his bosom."

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SPLENDID NEW SERIAL. YOU CAN START TO-DAY.

Dupes of Destiny

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

By Blanche Eardley, Writer of "The Bond Between."

PROLOGUE.

A YOUTH is in the private room of Messrs. Samuel Sharpe and Quirke, solicitors, awaiting the head of the firm's announcement as to whether he is the heir to the baronetcy of the late Sir Basil Wingate or not.

Mr. Sharpe says:

"You will remember, Mr. Rust, at the reading of the will, the title, which by special remainder he had power to dispose of, and the money were left by Sir Basil Wingate to the elder son of his run-away only daughter, Helen Jorningham, *should* she have one; and failing a son being born to her, the title and the money *with* the estate, should go to you, his nephew."

He then tells Cyprian Rust that, hearing Helen Jerningham went to Australia, he has extensively advertised for her in Australian papers, but with no effect. Therefore he congratulates his listener on becoming Sir Cyprian Rust.

The solicitor is called out of the room, and Cyprian Rust sees on the table an unopened letter with an Australian stamp. The address he recognises as being in the handwriting of his cousin, Helen Jerningham!

Is it written to announce the birth of a son and heir? If so it would rob him of the legacy at the eleventh hour!

A step sounds outside the door. Quickly Cyprian Rust thrusts the letter into his pocket. He hurriedly says good-bye to Mr. Sharpe, and when he reaches his hotel he reads the missive. It tells how Helen Jerningham has left Australia, so that the future heir—if a boy—may be born in England!

Sir Cyprian Rust carefully burns the letter that might have dealt the death-blow to his ambitions, and mentally resolves to go to any extremes to retain the title.

Meanwhile Helen Jerningham is dying on board an ocean liner in giving birth to twin sons.

From incoherent remarks that she makes, the physician who attends her is led to believe that a secret is attached to the boys' history. But she dies ere she reveals her name or the boys' identity!

Many years later.

Sir Cyprian learns, through the Rev. Philip Nullius, that a dying woman wishes to see him.

He goes to see her, and she shows him a later will of Sir Basil Wingate, by which all his property is left to the descendants of Helen Jerningham unconditionally. Sir Cyprian snatches this will from her, and she dies before she can inform anyone else.

Sir Cyprian visits Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox, where he meets Mr. Caleb J. Johnson, millionaire and City magnate, who is in love with the hostess. The baronet, who has Lady Violet in his coils, forces her to swear to take particulars of the millionaire's house and property.

Late in the evening Johnson proposes to Lady Violet. Knowing her position, she, of course, refuses him. As she does so, the palms in front of the window part and a man lurches heavily into the room.

Lady Violet recognises him as her husband—a former Major in the Army, who has been separated from her for many years. Hastily she requests Johnson to leave; then, turning on her unwelcome visitor, she by threats prevails upon him to go.

In the corridor this Society ruffian encounters Sir Cyprian, and sees upon his watch-chain the Sign of the Spade!

Edward Day proposes to Marcella Rust, the beautiful daughter of the baronet. Being refused, he angrily lets fall an allusion to Marcella's dead mother.

Lady Violet overhears this, and, with blazing eyes, dismisses Day, who acts as her secretary, from her service. She makes him an allowance of £250 a year.

Johnson discovers, through a private inquiry agent, the whole history of Major Richard Frayne-Lennox, and buys from a General Lyster the cheque that he had forged.

Edward Day is engaged by Johnson, the millionaire, at a liberal salary. He afterwards visits his wife, Lottie, a chorus girl, of whom he has grown tired. He tells her of the rupture between himself and Lady Violet, who does not know that he is married.

At Wingate Court, Marcella reads of the theft of a valuable

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picture from Caleb Johnson's house. As she was one of the last persons to see the picture, she evinces great interest in the accounts of the robbery.

Sir William Slade, of Harley Street fame, visits Sir Cyprian, and, as the day is very boisterous, is greatly concerned to hear that Marcella has set out for Danger Point, a very dangerous rock on the coast. His host, however, assures him that Marcella will be quite safe, as she knows the locality well.

As a matter of fact, she is only just rescued in time from a very perilous position.

Marcella feels that there is something very mysterious about the doings at Wingate Court, so writes to Lady Violet for advice. Her father, however, gets hold of this letter, and destroys it.

Sir Cyprian is very concerned when Sir William Slade announces that he identifies Philip Nullius as one of the children that was born on the Australian liner five-and-twenty years ago. The baronet mentally resolves that the curate must be got out of the way.

He gives the curate a letter of introduction to a clergyman in the south of England. Philip, thinking it will be to his advantage, goes.

Marcella, a day or two later, penetrates to a part of the house, to which her father has forbidden her. The dust laying about is frightful. She begins to retrace her steps when she hears a faint cry.

She goes down some stairs, and sees a door with glass panels.

Pressed against the glass is the white, delicate hand of a woman!

NINETEENTH CHAPTER.

The Woman of Mystery.

MARCELLA fell back with a cry of astonishment. The sight of that lily-white hand pressed against the glass panel in the door came as a sort of shock to her.

The secrecy that had appeared to exist concerning the forbidden wing, the attitude of her father's servants, even Sir Cyprian's own words to her, came with a flash of inspiration, illuminating the mystery of what lay beyond in the corridor, labelled by her father s orders "no thoroughfare!"

Who was the owner of that delicate white hand? she wondered—and why should she be confined in such seclusion in an underground passage of the Court?

Seized afresh with a desire to fathom the secret upon which she had so unexpectedly fallen, Marcella gently turned the handle of the door.

The slight noise it made had the effect of sending the hand from the panel, only for its place to be taken the following moment by a face, lit by unnaturally brilliant eyes, dark and frightened, that gazed in alarm upon the intruder in the passage.

Marcella nodded reassuringly. She felt that this woman with the timid, fawn-like eyes was no foe to be feared, but a helpless woman to be protected.

She put her mouth close to the glass and said in a low, cautious whisper: "The door is locked—how can I get in?"

Silently, and with a gleam of intelligence in the brilliant eyes, the woman raised her hand and pointed to an object in the passage behind Marcella's head. She turned quickly, and saw a nail, on which hung a key.

It was the work of a moment to detach it from its place, unlock the door, and walk into the room—her movements being followed keenly by the dark-eyed inmate who had crept behind a chair in the manner of a frightened child.

The room in which Marcella found herself left nothing to be desired in the way of furniture. It was as richly appointed as her own boudoir; flowers, plants, and mirrors being in profusion, yet the windows were nothing more or less than small panes of glass very high in the wall, and heavily barred outside, the only light in the room being that which came from the electric globes.

Marcella felt a strange sense of being in a beautiful cage, as she gazed round. She saw that another room opened out of the one she was in, and it was furnished as a bedroom—so the unknown prisoner in the Court lived in durance vile!

"Tell me," she said gently, "who are you—and why do you live so far from everything and everyone?"

The woman looked puzzled. "I have always been here," she said slowly. "I am happy here, *he* is kind to me sometimes, and I love Dolly!"

Marcella looked at the white, smiling face, that once must have been very beautiful, with a strange fear. She wondered whether her companion was quite in her right mind. There was a simplicity in her speech and manner that suggested a sudden stoppage of the powers of reason.

"Take me to 'Dolly,'" she replied gently. "Is she a little girl or your maid?"

"Dolly is Dolly—no one else!" the woman answered gently. "I don't know what I should do without her! Come, she is in there!"

Marcella followed her wonderingly, and lying in a miniature child's cradle she saw a life-size wax doll, over which the woman leant tenderly.

"They told me she was dead," she went on in a cooing voice. "Then when I said it was impossible for me to live without my baby, they let me have her. It is a long time ago since I was ill, but now she is with me, I don't mind anything—not even *him*," and she shuddered slightly, "only I wish baby would grow—she has been a long time like this!"

Marcella turned away.

Her eyes were swimming, and she could not trust herself to speak in the presence of such an awful tragedy. A woman with the mind of a child cherishing a wax doll instead of her own lost baby! It was more of a puzzle than ever that such a secret should be kept at the Court!

Why should the relatives of this lonely woman not acknowledge her openly, instead of burying her alive! Surely this was not the only reason for which Deacon had prevented her from entering the corridor?

A sudden thought struck her. She turned swiftly to the woman still caressing the doll.

"I want to ask you something," she said gently. "Who waits on you here? Have you a maid?"

She looked puzzled. "Sarah looks after me," she replied slowly, "and—and *he* always comes to see me on his way into the other rooms—the rooms where the beautiful things are kept." And she laughed softly.

Marcella did not hear the last words of her speech. She was wondering what man the lonely creature with the infinitely pathetic laugh could mean, when she spoke of him "hurting" her. Surely it must be Deacon!

"Tell me what man it is whom you see?" she said persuasively. "I may know him—I live here too, you know."

The woman looked at her thoughtfully, as though struggling with an idea that had floated accidentally into her mind.

"You live here," she murmured, "then you have seen *him*, too! He is dark—very dark—and sometimes he is harsh to me and says things I cannot understand——"

"A dark man!" Marcella exclaimed, remembering that brief encounter with the mysterious stranger coming out of the corridor some weeks ago. "Yes, I have seen him—but only once! Do you see him often?"

The woman nodded. "Yes, sometimes every day, but he has not been here to-day. I suppose he is busy—he is not often late."

Marcella leant towards her eagerly. "When does this dark man visit you?" she said quickly. "I should like to see him!"

A frightened expression crept into the woman's eyes. "He would not like it—he would be angry and scold me."

"No, not if he did not know I was here," Marcella breathed. "If you tell me when he may be coming to see you, I could hide behind those curtains until he had gone."

The frightened look intensified on the pale, quivering face, and the large, dark eyes gazed wonderingly into the clear, resolute ones of Marcella.

"I cannot," she murmured. "Go—please go; he will be

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very cross with me, and he threatened to take Dolly from me if I disobeyed him —and—" — a glimmer of tears showed in her eyes— "you don't want me to lose Dolly, do you?"

Marcella put her hand on her arm gently. "No, I will not stay since you fear it may get you into trouble," she replied. "I will go now, in case you think the dark man will soon be here and find the door undone. But I will come back again, now I have found you—only you must tell no one that I have discovered this room," she went on warningly, "or I may be prevented from ever seeing you any more."

"You will come again?" the woman repeated with a faint sigh. "Yes, come again, and I will take you to see the beautiful things in the other rooms—oh, they are wonderful—wonderful, and he loves them! I have seen him bending over them when he and his friends thought there was no one looking."

"That's a bargain then," Marcella said hastily —humouring what she imagined to be the fantastic play of a childish mind—"when I come again you will show me those beautiful things."

With a smile of infinite pity she opened the door and slipped into the passage, then, turning the key in the lock, she put it back on the nail.

Before moving on, she lifted the curtain that hung in front of the glass panels, and glanced into the room that held the mysterious captive. She was leaning over the wax doll that she had carried from the inner room, and the expression on her face made Marcella's eyes grow suddenly moist.

As she prepared to grope her way along the narrow passage, towards the staircase that led into the unused wing, a light step in the distance made her pause and listen with every sense strained to the uttermost.

She shrank back into a convenient corner, and waited while the steps drew nearer, and gazing from her hiding place, she presently saw the tall figure of a man coming in the direction of the panelled door.

It was too gloomy to see his face, but Marcella knew instinctively that he was the "dark man" to whom the strange woman had referred, and also identical with the man she had seen coming out of the forbidden corridor on Christmas Eve, and whose action in placing a spade guinea under the rug had so excited her curiosity.

"The dark man," she breathed, tingling with a sense of excitement, and watching with dilated eyes as the figure drew closer.

The man appeared apparently oblivious that he had an audience, for he walked slowly along, his face partly concealed by the profusion of black beard and hair, which, together with blue "goggles," acted almost as a disguise.

Moved by an uncontrollable impulse, Marcella swiftly stretched out one hand, just as he was passing her, and touched ever so slightly the white cuff that showed from under his sleeve. It was a slight action, so sudden and silent that the man did not guess that he had been touched, but passed on, and the next moment Marcella heard the closing of a door.

Some time later—perhaps a quarter of an hour—Marcella moved from her hiding-place and noiselessly followed the tall dark man up the stairs into the corridor. She was determined to trace him to his lair—to know who the stranger was that dared have secrets in her father's house. As she hurried after him, he suddenly stopped, as though to pick up something, then continued on his way.

Eager with the scent of battle in her nostrils, Marcella hastened her steps, and then before she could save herself, she fell heavily over something on the ground. It was an instant's work to spring to her feet, bruised yet not vanquished, and follow the tall figure ahead of her, that had not even paused at the sound of her fall.

Out into the corridor breathless and exultant, soon now she would know the man for what he was, she would come face to face with him, and challenge him with the secret in the corridor.

The strange steps kept ahead, and, moving to the left, the man went in the direction of Sir Cyprian's suite of apartments, quickening his speed.

Marcella was now almost abreast of him, but Fate, with that ironic method of dashing the cup from one's lips, again was on the side of the quarry, for a nail caught in her dress, and when she had freed herself the man had disappeared.

Suddenly she stopped; standing in the window seat on top of the stairs there was a shadowy figure. Could it be the same? she wondered.

With a noiseless movement she went up, and touched the man on his arm.

He turned quickly, and instead of the dark-bearded man she had followed so closely, saw the fair, almost hairless face of Edward Day.

"I thought you had gone to bed ages ago, Marcella," he said, in such tones of genuine surprise that she could only gaze at him silently. Was he acting ignorance, or was he really innocent of the fact that another man must have passed by him only a moment ago?

"I am looking for someone," she said coldly; "a tall, dark man who came out of the unused wing just now. Have you seen him?"

He looked amused. "I have seen no one of that description, Marcella. It could not have been Dr. Slade, because he is stout and rather bald, nor Sir Cyprian. Are you sure the man was not a servant?"

"It was not a servant," she said coldly, moving away, "but someone with no right to wander about the Court without leave."

As she turned back, he caught her hand in his.

"Marcella, don't keep me at such a distance always," he pleaded. "Give me a chance of winning back your regard."

"That is impossible," she retorted, "for you never had it! Besides, you are well aware of the fact that I am engaged to Mr. Nullius, the curate."

A slight smile flickered across his mouth. "Ah, I had forgotten for the moment that little incident of the interesting curate. By the way, he has left Crawley, has he not?" he went on carelessly, eyeing her between half-closed lids.

She raised her head and regarded him calmly. "Why ask me that when you knew of it before myself?" she said scornfully. "It's a waste of time to lay traps for me, Mr. Day. I can see through your methods very easily."

He flushed. "Really—ah, you say that, Marcella, because there are no traps or methods to be spotted," he laughed easily. "If I troubled to plot I fancy I should be rather successful."

"I don't doubt it," she retorted. "You would bring the whole of your genius to bear on an unworthy object! But I

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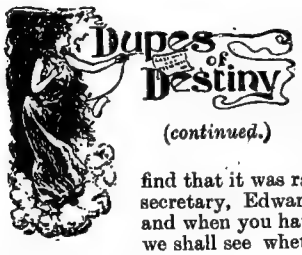

(*continued.*)

ani glad you will have no occasion to interfere in my private affairs."

He looked after her savagely. "Proud little termagant!" he muttered; "wait a bit, my dear cousin Marcella! You will find that it was rather unwise to snub the poor secretary, Edward Day. I shall score soon, and when you have lost the fascinating curate, we shall see whether you will be so ready to snub me then!"

In the meantime Marcella was knocking at the door of her father's study. She had dismissed Edward Day from her mind, and was occupied with the one thought concerning the man with the black beard.

Sir Cyprian rose from his chair as she entered. He was looking pale and slightly thoughtful, but he smiled lovingly upon his daughter as he said playfully:

"Well, my dear. It is rather late for a talk, but I will forgive you, since I am sure you have come to tell your old father that you are going to be a good girl and not worry him any more."

Marcella gazed at him steadily. "If by being a 'good girl' you mean that I have forgotten what I said about giving my love to Philip Nullius, father, I am afraid that I shall disappoint you again," she said gravely. "But you must know that I am not the sort of girl to take back to-day what I said yesterday—and I can never say that I do not love Philip. But in every other respect, father," she continued gently, "I will always try to please you by giving you no cause to worry about me."

Sir Cyprian stroked his moustache slowly. "Poor child!" he murmured half aloud, "I was hoping that you were better—that your foolish infatuation had given place to a more sensible frame of mind. But I can't scold you, Marcella; I can only regret the sad strain I see in you."

Something in his tone made Marcella flush angrily. The half tolerating, half-pitying speech was as gall and wormwood to her proud spirit. She would rather have had harsh vituperation heaped upon her head than be made an object for commiseration.

"I did not come here to discuss my engagement with Mr. Nullius," she said coldly, "but to tell you something else."

He shot a keen glance at her. "So long as you refrain from discussing the curate I shall be glad to listen to you, my dear," he said suavely; "only"—and he raised one white hand warningly—"spare yourself any great excitement. If you are afraid that you may lose your self-control, I beg of you to put off any discussion until you are stronger."

"I am perfectly strong," Marcella began hotly, when the words froze on her lips. Her eyes, following the movement of Sir Cyprian's hand, were fixed upon the shining linen of his cuff. Smeared across its white surface was a mark, as though a dusty hand had come in contact with it!

TWENTIETH CHAPTER.

The Man with the Black Beard.

"Dear Lady Violet,—*I am coming to see you, if I may, to-morrow afternoon concerning the answer to that question I asked you some weeks ago, and to which you were unable to reply definitely on account of family reasons. I told you that I never gave in, and I fancy now that even you will reward my patience and perseverance by saying just that one little word so necessary to my happiness.—I am, sincerely yours,*

"Caleb J. Johnson."

Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox had read and re-read the letter in her hand many times over.

She had received it the previous day, and from that time to within a few hours of Mr. Johnson's arrival she had wondered how much he meant by his innuendo about the family reasons, and whether he was at all acquainted with the existence of the real skeleton in her domestic cupboard.

She had not seen the financier since his proposal, and the unwelcome interruption that had held back the answer on her lips. She had refused an invitation he had since sent her, having only accompanied Marcella in the *role* of a chaperone to view the celebrated copy of the "Mona Lisa."

From that date Lady Violet had avoided those houses where she knew the financier would be most likely to visit. But in spite of her withdrawal from gaiety, she had heard of the dramatic loss Mr. Johnson had sustained in the theft of his masterpiece, and the fair, creamy skin of her ladyship had paled to a sickly sallow as she read hungrily the many suggestions thrown on the affair by various experts.

She rose and looked at her reflection in the long mirror. "You cannot let this man have any other answer than that which you gave him last time," she murmured. "Even if that skeleton did not exist to put a barrier between us, there is another—not of my making, thank God, but one in which I have a guilty knowledge, and which must for ever stand between myself and Caleb J. Johnson or any other man.

"I must stand alone. I have someone to protect more dear to me than position, money, or even my life; whatever happens I must guard my darling from the leper's touch."

Her face softened, and a curiously tender smile touched her lips as she turned away from the glass.

"That man has left England," her thoughts ran on; "he will never attempt to return now that he knows I possess his secret. His liberty is dear to him, such as it is, and he will never dare to force himself on me."

She rang the bell, and ordered the carriage to be ready in half an hour's time, then sat down and began to write a long, loving letter to Marcella, from whom she had not heard for some days.

Then a short time afterwards she leant back in her carriage, a lovely statuesque figure in rich furs, followed by the admiring glances of men and women, who were acquainted with her beauty through the photographs in the shops.

As her eyes wandered carelessly among the moving faces round her, Lady Violet gave a little start. A figure had attracted her attention, though there was nothing remarkable about it, with the exception of a profusion of inky black hair and a trim black beard. A pair of blue glasses denoted that the wearer suffered from defective sight.

Upon this harmless individual the eyes of the woman in the carriage gazed with something akin to fear and wonder. "What can he be doing here in that dress?" she muttered. "I must find out—he usually tells me when he is coming to town; this must be a new move.'

She stepped from the carriage and dismissed it, telling the coachman that she had some shopping to do that would detain her a very long time, and that she would drive back in a cab. When he had disappeared in the traffic, she hailed a hansom, and telling the driver to follow the man with the glasses and black beard, pulled the fur collar of her coat round her face and closed her eyes.

Presently the driver raised the little flap at the top of the hansom, and said in a loud aside:

"Lidy, the gent as you want me to foller 'as been joined by another one; they're turning into Victoria Station now by the Underground.'

Quickly paying the man his fare, she slipped out and caught up the man with the beard, who was talking earnestly with his companion, who was so disguised in a scarf and slouch hat that nothing could be seen of his face.

They passed by the Underground station, and came into the London, Brighton, and South Coast line. The crowd was dense, and a dull wintry fog had settled upon everything. She stood behind the man with the glasses at the booking stall, and heard him say, "Two first return Clapham," and immediately knew her destination. Then she took her ticket, and once more followed closely behind them. They were talking more loudly, and with less fear of being overheard.

"The train does not go for half an hour," the man with the glasses said; "we had better go into the refreshment room and have something to drink."

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"Half an hour!" She sighed with relief; that would give her just time in which to collect her thoughts, and decide upon her action in following the man with the black hair and goggles.

After all, how could she successfully attempt to avert his discovery of her identity? Yet, in spite of everything, she felt compelled to learn something—to hold some string by which she could control the destiny of one dear to her—far, far dearer than all else in the world.

She went into the waiting-room, and sat down; the room was large, and there were not many people in it. On the seat a few yards from her, she noticed dimly the figure of a girl. She was beautiful after a theatrical type, but her face was thin. She seemed to have some trouble on her mind, for her eyes were blue-rimmed and weary, and her mouth quivered like that of a child.

The woman whose wealth had never brought her happiness, felt a fellow-feeling for the golden-haired girl, whose way in life seemed also hard, and she wondered whether she were a wayside flower that had been plucked and worn for an hour.

She leant forward impulsively.

"Forgive me," she began in her low caressing voice, "but you don't seem well—can I do anything for you? Are you waiting for someone or going by train?"

The girl had started violently when she spoke first, then surprise had given way to admiration when she gazed at the musical-voiced woman who had addressed her. The aroma of violets and the richness of the furs did not escape her notice.

"I am not ill, thank you," she said slowly, her hands twisting and untwisting nervously. "I am waiting for my train. I am going to Brighton to join a company for tour."

Lady Violet raised her brows—that explained her first impression of the stage—this pretty, fragile-looking little creature was an actress! A member of the great middle-class who neither sank nor swam, but just went with the tide.

She looked at the girl's cloak. It was an old waterproof ulster, and her hat was a shabby straw trimmed heavily with velvet.

A sudden thought seized her. She drew closer to the girl, and said in her most seductive tones:

"I wonder will you do me a great service? I am going on some business that necessitates my looking as quiet as possible, and in these things"—with a gesture towards her sable coat—"that will be impossible. I want you to change clothes with me for a time, just your hat and cloak. I will give you my address, and you must come to see me when you return from your tour. I may be able to help you, as I know some big people in the theatrical profession."

The girl looked at her without speaking. Her London-bred intelligence was averse to putting implicit trust in plausible strangers; still, the face of the woman was so proud and aristocratic that somehow the girl felt she could not be judged by the common standard. Besides, the thought of appearing among her fellow actresses in priceless furs and ostrich feathers was a temptation to her vain little heart.

"It's a funny sort of favour!" she laughed, "and I'm afraid you won't make much by the exchange; but I don't mind obliging you, as you say it is so important."

They passed into the inner room, and there were quietly metamorphosed respectively into each other's sphere of life, from an exterior point of view.

"Good-bye," Lady Violet said, holding out her hand and smiling quietly. "Tell me your name so that I may remember my benefactress."

"My name's Lottie Haste," the girl replied. "I will return your beautiful things when I know where to send them."

"Don't do that—if they are any use, keep them. The coat is warm and I have others. I am a rich woman, child; you must come and see me on your return to town. This is my card."

She pressed the piece of cardboard into the girl's hand and

Almost everybody knows the value of Bovril as a strengthening and nourishing beverage. Bovril is equally valuable in cooking, and a little added to gravies, soups, croquettes, hashes, &c., wonderfully improves their flavour and increases their nourishing properties.

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Dupes of Destiny

(*continued.*)

hurried out. Her train was almost due, and she wanted to secure a seat in the same carriage as that occupied by the man with the dark beard and glasses. She was quite safe from discovery now—the flopping hat and shabby ulster of the little chorus girl were an ample disguise.

In the waiting-room Lottie Haste looked curiously at the card in her hand. She had taken a sudden fancy to the beautiful dark woman whose personality dominated her completely. As she gazed at the card, her face changed colour, and an exclamation rose to her lips—the name on the card was "Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox, Grosvenor Place, W."

"*His* aunt," she murmured; "that beautiful, gracious woman is the aunt of the heartless blackguard whom I married—Edward Day, the man who deserted me! And to think that she, of all women in the world, should be the one to whom I should do a favour in lending her my old rags! and *he* said she hated actresses, and would never allow him to mention my name! Yet she has the sweetest eyes I have ever seen in a woman. I will keep the card and one day call on Lady Violet." She smiled grimly. "Why, she's *my* aunt by marriage!"

In the meantime Lady Violet had taken her seat in the carriage, in which already the two men had seated themselves. They did not once glance her way, though a shabby-looking woman in a first-class carriage is not often seen.

With the exception of those three the compartment was empty, and Lady Violet pulled the collar and hood of the cloak closer round her face, and settled in a corner to doze. Her gentle breathing was listened to with grim satisfaction by her companions; then the man with the black beard spoke softly, and at the sound of his voice the silent figure in the opposite corner began to tremble.

"It's rather important that he should know nothing about me. *You* are a friend of the old cleric who got him into St. Paul's from the Foundling Hospital. His name was the Reverend James Cray—he's an old chap, and I've discovered that he is since dead—but *he* does not know it, and you must personate the old man's representative, you understand?"

"Yes," said the other voice slowly. "You want me to win his confidence—and then——" He paused significantly, and laughed chillily. "I understand."

"That's well," replied the man with the black beard softly. "He is not an ordinary sort of chap; he is strong, I should say, and not easily bowled out. He is tall, dark, and has very distinctive ways. His name is also unusual; it is Philip Nullius; and he is spending his holiday in a village called Leyton. He is there for a month—and you know a lot can be done *in a month*."

The woman in the shabby ulster shivered as though a cold blast had struck her.

The conversation had been of a different nature from that she had expected, and she had nearly regretted having followed the man—but the moment she heard the name of their apparently unconscious victim, every nerve was again on the alert.

It was an uncommon name, one that once heard would not be easily forgotten, and the occasion on which she had last heard it had been when her niece Marcella had told her the name of the tall, handsome, young curate whom she had accidentally seen outside the Dovermarle Hotel.

She had observed the tinge of colour that had swept the girl's creamy skin, and her woman's instinct had instantly told her that Marcella's fresh young heart had passed into the keeping of the curate, Philip Nullius! And it was against that lover that the man with the black beard was plotting something sinister!

Why was he taking so much trouble to bring ill upon the hapless curate? she wondered. Surely he could not be taking such elaborate steps because Marcella's girlish transparency had revealed her secret?

No—she knew sufficient about the nature of the man in the black beard to be quite sure that another more powerful motive was at the root of his desperate plot. What it was, she determined to discover—for it must be a very powerful lever that would make a man like that risk so much—possibly his liberty.

Besides, there was Marcella—she must not lose her lover. What matter if he were poor and obscure; he was the man who had won that dear, tender, and true heart, and therefore, for Marcella's sake, he must be saved.

Thoughts flashed through her mind with kaleidoscopic rapidity; plan after plan was evolved, to be discarded. She must be very wary before pitting her brain against that of the man in the black beard.

As the train slowed into the station of Clapham Junction they spoke again.

"You will find him at this address. I told him that I had a clerical friend there who would take an interest in him. The house is right out in the country, about five miles from Leyton. It is called 'Water Grange,' because of a moat that runs round it.

"Philip Nullius is living in Leyton in rooms, until my *friend* arrives at 'Water Grange.' His address is '18 Lillie Road, Leyton.' Now you know all that is necessary. I expect you to be subtle and delicate—no blundering—no confidences with other men. It is always better to tackle difficult jobs single-handed. You understand?"

The man nodded. "It's risky, and no mistake," he laughed. "A job more suited to another sort o' man than me—but if I take it in hand I'll promise you it won't fail; by the way," he added curiously, "you don't mind my asking a straightforward question, do you? Is there a special reason why this young parson chap should be knocked on the napper?"

The woman in the corner held her breath for the answer.

After a pause the man in the black beard said softly:

"The reason why Philip Nullius should be out of my path is one so startling and unexpected that even your strong nerve would be shaken, my dear 'Shovel,' at the prospect of such danger threatening me—the man who has so long been your leader and brought you wealth through his successful daring.

"That curate, ignorant as he is of the fact, is the most deadly of *all* my foes, and I shall know no peace until he is removed from where he may do me harm. There are methods more safe than the extreme one, remember, but the one you adopt in order to do my bidding is one that must be equally silent and leave no traces behind!"

A few moments later the two men, followed by Lady Violet, got out at the Junction, one leaving the station. In a separate compartment the other and Lady Violet travelled back to town.

When the train arrived at Victoria, Lady Violet looked in vain for the dark-bearded man, he was no where to be seen; but passing straight on ahead of her she saw her brother-in-law, Sir Cyprian Rust, smiling as though on very good terms with the world and himself.

Once outside the station the baronet hailed a hansom, and drove in the direction of Piccadilly to his club.

As he leant back, busy with his thoughts, two men, in earnest conversation walking along the wide pavement, attracted his attention; one he recognised instantly as the financier, Caleb J. Johnson, but it was on the face of the financier's companion that Sir Cyprian's genial blue eyes were fixed in a gaze of horror.

The man seemed to be walking with an air of sullen unwillingness by the financier's side. He was sportive-looking in dress, and his reckless, dare-devil face had a cowed expression.

With a silent gesture from the financier, a brougham drove up, and as the two men stepped inside, Sir Cyprian wiped his brow with his handkerchief; the face of the man beside Caleb J. Johnson was that of the intruder who had accosted him so strangely the night of Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox's dinner-party—the man who had recognised the fateful sign on his chain!

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"What—what does *he* want with that Johnson chap?" he muttered, with chattering teeth. "Can it mean danger to me? Is my star beginning to flicker in the firmament of success?"

TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER.

"There is no Barrier Now."

"AND you understand that you go to-night? All is ready for you. As you step on to the deck of that Australian liner, a cheque for £1,000 will be put into your hands. A watch will be kept over your movements by agents of mine, who will notify at once whether you are keeping to your promise. The very instant you attempt to land anywhere in the British Isles, that interesting little cheque, which was dishonoured through your forgery, will be placed in the hands of the police.

"You understand, I hope; don't do anything rashly—take your time to decide about remaining in England to stand in the dock, and probably get a long term of penal servitude—or go to Australia and live on the best of the land for the rest of your natural life. I hope you follow me, Major Frayne-Lennox?" And Caleb J. Johnson bit the end of a cigar, and gazed across the room where that worthy, the derelict husband of Lady Violet stood chewing the end of his moustache.

"I understand well enough," he answered sullenly. "I am in your power. I haven't much choice. And as to agreeing to your terms, I don't fancy you need worry about my returning to England. A thousand a year is not easily earned nowadays. But don't think I can't guess your motive for wishing me conveniently 'dead,'" he said, with a slight sneer.

"I wish," replied Caleb J. Johnson slowly, "to relieve a good woman of such an incubus as yourself. To spare her the knowledge that you are alive to disgrace her again—to let her think that you are really as dead to the world as you are to her—and now I fancy you have the best chance in your life in which to retrieve your miserable existence by dying to all intents and purposes."

The other shrugged his shoulders cynically. "All right, I'm on the job. My wife will be able to write 'R.I.P.' over my grave in her memory from to-night."

When that night Major Frayne-Lennox, under another name, went on board a liner from the docks, the man who saw him off and returned in the tug to the shore, carried away with him a bundle, over which he kept jealous guard until the train arrived in Fenchurch Street Station, then jumping into a cab, he gave an address to the driver, and touched the bundle with an exultant laugh.

"So drops the curtain on *your* existence, my friend. I consider that I have done the kindest and most humane action in my life to-night—only I did not think it would be so easy. Money is a wonderful oil with which to turn round the wheels of life!"

* * * * * *

"And now I have come for my answer. I have waited long for it, and you must admit, Lady Violet, that I deserve some little kindness at your hands."

Mr. Johnson held the slim white fingers of her ladyship in a close grasp, and looked steadily into her eyes. His own were rather bright, but the expression of his face was enigmatic, only his mouth smiled.

She released her hand slowly from his, and motioned him to a chair. She was trembling slightly, and her eyes were troubled.

"I am sorry, Mr. Johnson, that you were not content to accept my first answer as the inevitable," she said at last; "because it compels me to speak very plainly on a subject that I had hoped never to re-open with anyone for the rest of my life. I am not a free woman."

A curious light crept into the financier's eyes—a mingling of triumph and self-contempt.

"Don't tell me, Lady Violet," he said quickly. "I know

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MOTHER SEIGEL'S SYRUP

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CURES CONSTIPATION.

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all that you could ever have to tell me. I understood that relationship between yourself and—the uninvited guest at your dinner-party. I am a man of the world, and can read between the lines of Fate better than most men, and in spite of what I knew that night, I also knew that you would one day give me the answer I desired—the answer that would make you my wife and the richest woman in Society. It has come earlier than even I dared to hope."

He paused and looked at her keenly.

"Lady Violet, I cannot pretend to feel what I am going to communicate to you, because in my heart I honestly rejoice in the occasion that makes it possible for me to repeat my question."

She turned her head sharply to him, and he saw that she looked very pale.

"What do you mean?" she whispered, her voice unconsciously sinking to a murmur. "What can you have to tell me that will affect my answer to you?"

He took a swift step towards her. "Only this, Lady Violet," he said quietly, yet the blood was throbbing in his veins with the sense of victory—"you need no longer hug the chains that have for so many years fettered you to a scamp. I won't say any more—but tell you that your patience and long-suffering have been rewarded, and you are free now to choose another husband, and I am bold enough to dare hope that you may come to regard me in that light. I—I—care very much for you," he broke out passionately—"and could make you care for me."

She flung her hand out with a gesture that stopped the words on his mouth. "Tell me how you know—this! How you knew that it would be welcome news to me! Wives are generally supposed to mourn their husbands' death, you know"—she finished with a hysterical laugh.

He put his hand in his pocket, and drew out a paper.

"I will read it to you," he said quietly. "Sit down."

She obeyed him silently, then in a carefully-modulated voice Mr. Johnson read:

"While some dock labourers were at their work in the early hours of the morning, they discovered the following articles of a gentleman's wardrobe—a coat, stained with blood, and a waistcoat, together with a soft, crush hat. In one of the pockets of the coat a note-book was found, but no money or jewellery. The name written in the note-book was that of an officer in the Army, Major Richard Frayne-Lennox, who some years ago left the Service under a cloud, and was believed dead by his friends. The widow of the unfortunate man is a well-known leader in Society, and much sympathy will be felt for her; the police are already searching for the body, as they fear foul play."

"Oh, how awful—how horrible!" she gasped. "I never thought such a wretched end would be his." She started to her feet suddenly. "Mr. Johnson, I cannot play the hypocrite by attempting to feel that this is a great sorrow to me, but I am, after all, humane, and to think that that man was *once* my lover is a fearful shock; he must have sunk so low—so frightfully low. He was also the father of my child!"

"Your child!" he exclaimed. "I did not know you had one—is it dead?"

Her face flushed and then paled. She could have bitten off her tongue after she had spoken, but it was too late. "Yes," she said quietly, "I lost it." She turned to him with a pitiful smile. "Mr. Johnson, you will not compel me to listen to you to-night while that wretched newspaper paragraph is still ringing in my ears? Please go now—I could not listen—to-night—I want to be alone."

He took her hand in his. "I understand," he murmured, "and appreciate your reason for wishing me to go now; but you will understand that when I call again in a day or two I shall hope to be received as your future husband!"

She bowed her head. The strong overpowering personality of the Gold King made her absolutely unable to cope with his will. She was only glad of the respite—that there was yet a little time in which she could collect her thoughts and grow accustomed to the new phase of life spreading before her.

And gradually, when the nine days' wonder concerning the non-appearance of the body of the late Major Frayne-Lennox was over, Society heard with expressions of pleasure and disapproval that Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox would shortly and quietly become the wife of the well-known financier, Mr. Caleb J. Johnson of New York City.

She received a curt note from Sir Cyprian congratulating her on her conquest, but none from Marcella, either in congratulation or in reply to the letter she had written some days ago. It was unsuual for Marcella to leave a whole week without writing, and a vague sensation seized Lady Violet, in the midst of all her quiet preparations for her wedding, that something was wrong at the Court.

She wrote immediately to Sir Cyprian, warning him that should all not be well with Marcella, she would instantly go up to the Court and bring her away at all costs.

The following day a telegram arrived. She opened it fearfully, then sighed with relief. It was from Marcella, and ran:

"*In bed with bad cold, don't worry—sorry unable come to town for wedding. Love.*—MARCELLA."

She pressed it to her lips, and the murmured words, "My darling girl," reached the ears of the financier, who was looking at her curiously.

"You are fond of that girl," he said drily. "I shall be jealous of her soon."

She looked at him swiftly. "I love Marcella dearly," she answered softly; "almost as though she were my own child."

"More than you love Edward Day, your nephew, eh?" he said smilingly. "He is a clever young chap, and your letter of introduction to me came just when I wanted a secretary. He will be installed next week; at present he is holiday-making in the country, I believe."

"Holiday-making!" she said sharply. "I did not know. I am not very keen on him personally, but I am glad my letter procured him work."

She did not add that he was no relation to her—that he had been the child of the unfortunate woman whom she had befriended in a moment of impulsive pity. The little she had written had told enough without explaining too much. At any rate, she was glad that there would be no occasion for Marcella to meet Edward Day again.

Moved by a sudden thought she went up to her future husband and said quickly:

"Caleb, I want you to do me one great favour when—when we are married."

"You have only to command—I'll obey," he murmured, touching her hand with his lips. "What is it, Violet?"

"That you will do all you can to get Sir Cyprian to let Marcella live with us. She is unhappy, I fancy, at home—and I could be a mother to her!"

"Say, rather, a sister," he smiled—then added: "I will soon do that for you."

She looked at him gratefully. "Thank you, Caleb. You are a strange man, yet I think you really care for me."

A slow smile curved his lips. "I do care very much—I have dared a great deal to win you—my peerless bride!"

The wedding day dawned, and at an unfashionable church, at an unfashionable hour, the Society beauty and the New York millionaire were made man and wife. They had desired no publicity, and hardly anyone knew of the date of the wedding.

As the bride and bridegroom stepped out of their carriage at the station, *en route* for the Continent, Lady Violet's maid met her with a telegram.

"This has just come, my lady."

With a curious tightening of her heartstrings, she tore the orange-tinted envelope open. Instinctively she guessed that it contained bad news; as she read the few words on the inclosure she uttered an exclamation:

"Violet!" said the financier sharply, "is anything wrong?" Then, taking advantage of the prerogative of a husband, he looked over her shoulder, and read:

"*Marcella left Court. Keep her till I arrive. Sure to go to you.*—CYPRIAN RUST."

(Another long instalment next week.)

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Conducted by CYNTHIA.

[In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of SHORT STORIES.*]*

Country Men v. Town Men.

"ETHEL" wants to know if a country girl is not more precluded from the chances of meeting eligible suitors than a town girl? No, "ETHEL," do not be despondent. Your case appears very much worse than it is. Living in the country is not necessarily prejudicial to a girl's meeting eligible suitors. In fact, I think the reverse is the case. You will find that the proportion of old maids in the country is less than in towns. Sooner or later the right man turns up, so don't be worried. Perhaps you do not meet so many men as a London girl, but perhaps you are all the better for that. Meeting a lot of men does not necessarily lead to marriage.

* * * * *

I myself know a family of three girls who have all their lives lived in the remotest country districts. Now all are well and happily married. Had they lived in town they might have had many flirtations and become experts at that pastime, but is it not better to meet few men and true, than many and unreliable? In the case of my friends, visits from men were few and far between, yet, somehow or other, when they did appear, they turned out to be, from a girl's point of view, worth a dozen of the town butterflies a London girl encounters.

The Best Time to Marry.

"WHICH is the best time to marry?" asks "ENA."—Whenever things seems opportune, my dear "ENA." Few girls are inclined to sit down and ask themselves this question in cold blood. I should imagine that you are not engaged, or, if so, you have entered into the thing in a very philosophical spirit. Generally speaking, early Spring is the best. Then you have all the external joys of Nature to accompany your realisation of love's dream, with all the outdoor recreations to share with each other, such as cycling, walking, driving, boating. The possibilities of any disturbance of that dream are less than if accompanied by the cold and damp of winter. And we all know how important it is to get over the early stages of marriage without a "tiff."

* * * * *

When winter comes, you will have accustomed yourselves to each other, and will take to fireside pleasures and winter enjoyments and responsibilities as a natural sequence and pleasant variance. But a marriage in winter, when all is drear and dark, when fog chokes one, when microbes are getting active, and household expenses and bothers are greater than in summer, may be the prelude to ill-temper, and perhaps divergence which joyous Spring drives away. So if your man did really pop the question under the mistletoe a week or so back, and you have an interest in this question, I advise you to wait till Easter, when the new year will be old and pleasant enough to beam on you.

A Love that has Endured.

"DARBY and JOAN" write me a joint letter, and this is what they say: "We are the happiest couple alive, and yet both of us are dreading the hour when one shall be called to rest, and so leave the other alone. We are eighty-three years old." I can quite understand your feeling anxious, "DARBY and JOAN," but you say you are the happiest couple alive, and surely this is something to be very thankful for. When the call comes I am sure the one left will have hope and faith enough to feel that the other is waiting with hands outstretched in welcome. So try to forget all but this. Life is so short that it should be happy, and, if possible, free from care.

Love and Jealousy.

"F. H. T." says: "I like two girls, one in England and one in America; the one in England is very jealous even if I kiss her married sister, and I have had a quarrel with her. The American never quarrels with me, is not jealous, and loves me more. Which one shall I be engaged to?" From what you tell me, "F.H. T." I should certainly advise you to get engaged to the American girl, but, at the same time, remember being jealous shows that the English girl loves you too. America is a long way off, but a girl who is not jealous is seldom met with, so I think you would be happiest with her. Jealousy is the ruin of many a happy home.

An Errant Lover.

I VERY much sympathise with "MADGE," but I fear that as her lover visits the other girl so constantly, and is so reserved about it, it rather suggests that his affection for you has waned. One can generally tell this when told that anyone's love for you is "just the same." Those words have an ominous ring, and generally mean, that while he still thinks you are a most charming and attractive girl, there is somebody else who—well, with whom he is *in love*. I should advise you to take no further steps in the matter, beyond telling him that while he continued these visits, all must be regarded as over between you. If he really loves you, that will soon bring him to his senses, and if, after all, he is merely flirting with the other girl, as is very likely the case, he will soon drop it.

Two Suitors.

"GRETA" is in a puzzling position about two gentleman friends. She met them both at a party, and both seemed to take a fancy to her. After the meeting they called in turn, but neither knew the other was smitten. "GRETA" likes them exactly equally, and cannot choose between them. One is rather a frivolous young man, who talks a lot, and is very agreeable. The other is much more serious, and steady. Would it be wrong for "GRETA" to receive the attentions of both of them for awhile until she makes up her mind?

* * * * *

I can see complications ahead, "GRETA," if you do so, though I can quite understand you do not want to make up your mind on so delicate a matter until you have seen more of them both. After all, I suppose you are not called upon to fall in love with either just because they pay you attentions. A girl can always reserve the right to have what friends she likes until things have reached the engagement stage. Wait until one or the other of them says or does something definite, then give him the answer you feel you ought to give. If you don't like him enough, have the courage to tell him so.

Cynthia

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"*Ruddington.* "(*Miss*) *A. VINCENT.*

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Sixty Years Ago-and Now.

**"What's rank, or title, station, state, or wealth,
To that far greater worldly blessing, health?
What's house, or land, or dress, or wine, or meat,
If one can't rest for pain—nor sleep—nor eat—
Nor go about in comfort? Here's the question,
What's all the world without a good digestion?"**

The above lines are culled from the "Poet's Corner" of a journal of some sixty years ago. It was about the same period that **BEECHAM'S PILLS** started upon their long and prosperous career, and it is possible that the poet had not then tried the merits of that most excellent remedy. That he did so later is more than probable. If so, he may still be in the land of the living, hale and hearty. For nothing is more conducive to a long and happy life than a sound state of the digestive organs.

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